hear me out...
a tumblr sexyman zine

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Hear Me Out... **is a free, unofficial digital fanzine celebrating Tumblr (and the Internet at large)'s various sexymen, featuring many, *many* characters from over the years, from the kings of the sexyman bracket to the most obscure of babygirls.**

This booklet features exclusively characters listed by the *Sexypedia Wiki (with which we are unaffiliated)*: for off-Sexypedia picks, make sure to check out our secondary pdf, *Here By Unpopular Demand* !

The pieces that follow were made with love. Please enjoy your descent into madness ♥

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Poem or prose · Illustration · Blood Warning

ALERT
SEXYMAN BREACH
CONFIDENTIAL

SXYMN
CLARA KAY

#1
COOL DUDE
#1
#1 TUMBLR SEXYMAN!

Written By Persy House

Spamton would sell anything to anyone. While cars were his forte, he was no stranger to selling jewelry, clothing, even [[REDACTED]]. One thing he had never had the opportunity to sell, however, were divorce papers. Unfortunate, as it may have better prepared him for this [[Most Uncomfortable Pillow You'll Ever Own!]] situation.

Swatch peered at him from above his pink-and-yellow glasses (which you could [[Bet Your Bottom Dollar!]] Spamton didn't steal from him), an annoyed expression on his face. "Once again, I must inform you two that I'm not an actual divorce lawyer," he stated, shuffling papers in his hands.

"Uee hee hee!" the person – or [[Pondering My Orb]]-shaped jester – cackled from beside him. "Now, what kind of fun, fun, fun would this divorce be if you were?"

Spamton glared at Jevil, crossing his arms. "Of course your [[Clown Around Town @$$]] can still only [[Think Long And Hard About]] fun, you [[$4.99]] jester!"

"Now, now. Let's be civil," Swatch said, holding his arms up.

"Yes, yes, civil, civil! Wouldn't want the King and Queen catching word of our Neo-chaos fun, now would we?" Jevil cackled again, clearly not caring one way or the other.

"And [[Who, What, Where, & How]] would you know about [[The

Smooth Taste Of Neo?]] Only a [[BIG SHOT]] like [[Spamton, World's Number One Salesman!]] can understand the [[Playing With Power]] of [[Hyperlink Blocked]]!"

"Can we move on? I don't have all day for this," Swatch said.

Jevil laughed again, pushing his short legs against the desk in front of him to spin his swivel chair in a circle. "A mischief, mischief! The salesman is the one who can't keep his mouth closed! I'm merely spinning, spinning, spinning!"

Swatch sighed, rubbing his forehead as if to stave off an impending migraine. "I'm going to move on," he said before Spamton could retort, as the salesman was already opening his mouth to spew more nonsensical references. "So as neither of you signed a prenup, we're here to discuss the division of property as you carry through with this divorce."

"That damned [[Clown Emoji]] won't be getting a single [[$19.95]] from me!" Spamton declared.

"Let's play a numbers game, game! Subtract zero from zero to get zero, and that's how much of your precious kromer you'll have at the end!" Jevil clapped gleefully.

Ignoring the two once again, Swatch read off the paper in front of him. "As stated by the Queen's law, since you two were married in Cyber City, your assets will be divided 50/50. It says here that Jevil owns..." Swatch's eyes narrowed. "...151 diamond bullets, 53 spade bullets, 66 heart bullets, 47 club bullets, 13 carousel horses and ducks, and 9 scythes. Then, in parentheses, 'I am the tenth scythe, uee hee hee.'" He read Jevil's signature cackle in a monotone voice, causing the clown to laugh himself.

“And as for Spamton...” Swatch pulled out another piece of paper, glancing over it before sighing. “This just says [[Hyperlink Blocked]] around and find out, you wanna be [[BIG SHOT]].”

“And you can [[Take That To The Bank!]]” The salesman replied.

“Spamton, this is an important legal matter. You have to disclose your belongings, per the Queen herself.”

“I don’t have to do anything, you [[Slime!]] I have the [[Freedom]], and I make my own [[Massive Shots]]!”

“You know nothing of freedom, little puppet! Only I am free, free, and you remain imprisoned with the rest of the world! Uee hee hee!” Jevil cackled again.

“Oh shut it, you [[Dirt Cheap Trick]]! I-”

“That’s enough.” Swatch cut in. “Spamton, I need you to list your belongings, or you will not be able to finalize this divorce.”

“You’re all [[Crooked Thieves]]! You [[Hackers And Scammers]] won’t see an ounce of my [[Get Rich Quick]]!” Spamton shot out of his chair as he said this, waving an arm to the side to emphasize his point.

“Quite a bold, bold claim for the seedy salesman! You create nearly as much chaos, chaos as me!” Jevil declared, also standing up to do a couple of gleeful hops.

Spamton scowled at his soon-to-be-ex-husband. “I am a [[Good And Honest Man]]! Unlike you, dragging the [[Cuddly Plush Cat]] into all your games!”

“A mischief-mischief! He loves to play, play games, games. And you do the same with that little microphone!” Jevil laughed again.

“You’ll [[Burn In Hell]], clown!” Spamton shouted, his words flying through the air and forming bullets. Jevil happily teleported around them, laughing as each letter missed him.

"So you want to play, play again, little salesman? You should know not to challenge a card shark!" he cackled, mouth opening wider as he fired two diamond bullets at Spamton.

The former Addison ducked, the diamonds flying over his head and crashing into Swatch's bookshelf. It fell over with a resounding *thud*, some papers that had been resting at the top fluttering through the air. "Holy [[Cungadero]]! That almost had me [[It Hurts, It Hurts, God Put Me Out Of My Misery Already!!]]"

Swatch slammed his hands on his desk, shoving his chair backward with his legs as he stood up. "You two will NOT destroy my office again, is that clear?"

"A chaos, chaos! Destruction brings joy if only you change your hearts!" Jevil declared.

"[[For $8,000 A Month, I Will Stop.]]" Spamton added.

"Get out, both of you!" Swatch shouted, pointing towards the door.

"One day you will learn to be free, free, truly free like me!" Jevil said, teleporting to god-knows-where as he said the last word.

"That [[Killer Clown From Outer Space]] won't know what hit him when [[She Took Everything In The Divorce]]!" Spamton said, strolling out of Swatch's office as if he hadn't just nearly been impaled by two diamonds.

Swatch put his head in his hands and sighed. Then he turned to the whiteboard behind him, erasing the large number and writing a new one in red ink.

Days Spamton and Jevil have been trying to finalize the divorce: 34.

?
DRINKS
BOTJUICE
IT'S SHORT FOR ROBERTJUICE. IT CHANGES COLOR WITH TEMPERATURE
MAIN
SPAGHETTI CODE
SPAGHETTI WOVEN BY MASTER CODERS, MADE OF MACARONS AND RIBBONS

I Am The Sexy

Written By HopeStoryteller

As far as Queen is concerned, her plan is flawless.

As far as she is concerned, all of her plans are flawless before she carries them out. If they don't *remain* flawless once she does so, that is hardly her fault. It is a well-known saying among the Lightners, if one with a number of conflicting accounts regarding who said it first, that no plan survives contact with the enemy. Queen has taken it to mean, in her case, that it is quite common for plans to stop working once they are carried out, and she shouldn't feel bad when her own doesn't.

This plan, however, *will* work. She is certain of that. She was also certain that creating more Dark Fountains would work out in her favor, but it isn't *her* fault that she was acting on incomplete information.

Now that the internet has been returned to her, at *last*, Queen no longer has to worry about a *lack* of information. Not that she worries much in general. She has more important things to do than worry! She–

"Queen? What are you *wearing?*"

–has a problem, if Ralsei's reaction is any indication. Or perhaps she doesn't. Ralsei is hardly representative of the *entirety* of her audience. Still, she should practice, just in case someone else is incapable of recognizing her outfit on sight. Then again, he hadn't

had a search history for her to work off of, so either he uses antivirus protection strong enough to keep even *her* out or he just... doesn't use the internet.

Fortunately, the former residents of Cyber World–and at least half of the current residents of Castle Town, though hopefully more than that–*do* use the internet.

She is likely perfectly fine. Ralsei is an outlier and should not have been considered in her initial calculations, never mind counted.

Still– she could enlighten him herself. She should at least answer his question. It *is* her duty as Serial Number Q5U4EX7YY2E9N to provide as much information as possible to as many people as possible.

Perhaps she will!

"A Formal Green Suit," Queen says. "A Comically Large Top Hat. A Round, Puffy Red Flower Attached To My Lapel. A Pair Of Sparkly Blue Sunglasses."

"I... can see that." Ralsei is still staring. "*Why* are you wearing all that?"

"I Am The Sexy."

"...What?"

"I Am," Queen repeats more emphatically, "The *Sexy*."

"I'd ask you to explain that but I'm pretty sure the explanation would make even less sense."

"It Makes Perfect Sense!" There are footsteps behind her. Light ones. Lancer, most likely. "Hello! Care To Tell Ralsei Who I Am Dressed Up As?"

"Hiya, Girldad!" Lancer pauses. "I... dunno, but you look super cool!"

Queen just *sighs*. "Do You Not Use The Internet Either. Why Does Nobody Use The Internet. What Has The Internet Ever Done To You. The Internet Has Done Nothing Wrong."

"Um," Ralsei says.

"I use the internet!" Lancer says encouragingly. "I mostly use it to look up tips for how to dig better holes though."

...Clearly, Lancer is *also* an outlier and should not be counted. However! While Ralsei being lacking in a crucial part of his internet education can be (somewhat) excused, Queen's own arbitrarily-decided son *cannot* be lacking in that.

"I Will Explain," Queen decides. "But First I Need Battery Acid (Aged 3 And Up)."

There are many websites that are favored by Lightners and Darkners alike, not that many individuals in either group are aware that the other exists, and there are nearly as many *types* of websites as there are pages on the internet. With the power of the internet, a given user could play all sorts of silly games. They could buy or sell anything their little heart desired. They could learn new skills or new information. They could read news, or write their own. They could cause drama, or stay far away from it.

Queen would be hard-pressed to choose a favorite website... though, in truth, it isn't a hard decision at all once she thinks about it for more than two nanoseconds.

There is a particular microblogging platform that, despite the multiple times it is said to have 'died,' has in fact done nothing of the sort. The community within it is strange and quirky and completely anonymous, and occasionally fixates on particular fictional characters to the point of referring to them as 'sexymen,' despite the fact that few of these individuals fit the Lightners' standards of the word.

Personally, Queen is *fascinated* by this. If there is any site upon the Lightner internet that draws her attention more often than not, it is this one. Thanks in no small part to its anonymity, it is one of the few sites that she has been able to mirror to her Darkners without accidentally revealing the existence of her own Dark World. Additionally, thanks to the site's quirkiness, it has been *quite* the hit with people who were *not* Queen as well.

Thus, her plan is simple: mimic these 'sexymen' until her former peons like her again.

It is a simple plan, but it is a flawless one.

...At least, she *thought* it was a flawless one.

"So, you want to... become one of these 'sexymen'?" Ralsei sounds a little disbelieving, which isn't a good sign seeing as he now has all the requisite knowledge to understand what she is getting at.

"Sexyman (Gender Neutral)," Queen clarifies before taking a *long* swig of her battery acid. Admittedly, the individual she is attempting to portray has never been pictured drinking battery acid, but she thinks that some allowances could–and should–be made for the fact that she, unlike this sexyman, is not an organic being.

"*Why???*"

"So My People Will Like Me Again."

"And you're... cosplaying?? Instead of... I don't know, talking to them?"

"Why Would I Do That."

Ralsei just *sighs*, which is not an answer in any language that Queen understands.

"Hey, for what it's worth, *I* think you're doing a good job!" Lancer chirps.

"Thank You, Spade Son."

"Just..." Ralsei folds his little furry paws together. "If you really think this is a good idea–"

"Of Course It Is A Good Idea. It Is My Idea. What Were You Saying?"

The goat boy pauses for just a little too long before continuing. "It... might be a better idea to pick a different one?"

"Why. This Sexyman Has An Impeccable Sense Of Style."

"...Context? Context is important. Isn't that guy the *villain* in the movie he's from? You know..."

"The *bad guy?*" Lancer gasps. "What's wrong with being the bad guy? *I'm* the bad guy!"

"Lancer, you haven't been the bad guy since you and Susie became friends at least. Possibly not ever."

"Aww..."

Ralsei awkwardly pats Lancer on the back and continues, "Anyway, you really *should* talk to people, but I'm not sure that coming across as the bad guy is going to help with that. Or with anything at all."

Unfortunately, Ralsei does have a point. A *minor* one.

Some amendments to her plan may be in order. It's a good thing that no one except Ralsei and Lancer witnessed her like this.

"You Will Not Speak Of This To Anyone," Queen says resolutely. "Except For Kris Or Noelle Or Maybe Susie."

Ralsei really *does* have a point: perhaps she wants to avoid so-called 'sexymen' that are already seen as villainous in the pursuit of improving her image. Fortunately, there are a number of other options. One of them is even blue, just like her! While this particular sexyman certainly *was* a villain, originally, he became anything but one by the end of the movie he appeared in, and that difference matters.

Surely, *this* plan is flawless. Surely.

"...Queen?" Ralsei sighs. "What are you... *why?*"

"This Sexyman (Gender Neutral) Used To Be A Bad Guy But Isn't Anymore," Queen explains. "I Also Used To Be A Bad Guy Because Nobody Told Me That Dark Fountains Were A Bad Thing For A Really Long Time And Also I Was Going Through Internet Withdrawal. Surely You Are Capable Of Connecting Those Wires."

"Okay, yes, but you still look like a bad guy if people aren't familiar with the source material."

"They Should Be!"

Lancer, passing by on his bike, suddenly skids to a stop. "...Girldad? If you wanna be the bad guy, why didn't you ask me? The expert!"

Queen throws her cape to the ground dramatically. "Oh Come On!"

It was not perfect. It was incredibly *far* from perfect, actually. To make matters worse, Queen is nearly *out* of options unless she expands her search criteria, and so she does precisely that. The next viable option is, in fact, also a villain. However, the internet as a whole was very excited, while the users of the microblogging site that started the entire sexyman phenomenon were even more so. Additionally, Queen is growing *increasingly* tired of all this, and she would quite like to dress as a sexy*woman* for once.

And so, when she walks out of the quarters she's appropriated as her own to a very tired-looking Ralsei and a Lancer who really is just happy to be included, she declares, "I Don't Care What You Guys Think I'm Going Out There Anyway."

"Uh... okay," Ralsei says in that slow tone that clearly means he's just as baffled as her previous outfits. "For what it's worth, I really don't think all this is necessary."

"Then How Do I Make Them Like Me."

"You *don't,*" he emphasizes. "You can't *make* people do anything. Or, I guess you could, and did, but generally, that doesn't last forever, and once it's done you end up with a mess like this one. I can't believe I'm having to say this, but please just... take mind control *off* the table?"

"There Isn't A Table."

"You know what I mean!"

"I don't," Lancer says unhelpfully. "Where's the table?"

Ralsei reaches back for the hat always hanging on his back–Queen wonders, is he actually going to put it on? He never *wears* it. He doesn't now, either. Instead, he buries his face in his hat, and *screams* into it.

"Are You Okay," Queen asks, because at this point it seems like a rather pertinent question.

"No! No, I'm not okay, because neither are you!" Ralsei's words are slightly muffled by the whole hat situation, though she can see his eyes peering over the rim of it now. "You *can't* make people like you, Queen, not in any way that means something. You can't make them trust you, either. You can certainly reach out and try to build trust again, and some of your people might not be willing to try again–and that's okay, that's *their choice*, not yours–but some of

them will be! Some of them still care about you, even though you haven't been talking to them! Please, for the love of–*talk to them!*"

"But: What If They Don't Want To Talk To Me."

"You'll never know if they do or don't unless you try. *Please* try, I'm so tired."

"But: What If I Just Called His Former Father A Disgusting Man-Thing Instead."

"That's... not going to help."

Lancer giggles. "I think it would be funny, though!"

Ralsei lowers his hat entirely and says, "Personally, I think it would work better if you talked to them as *yourself*, not dressed up as... what are you dressed up as now?

"An Evil Resident." That prompts no reaction, because of course it doesn't, so she clarifies, "A Tall Woman Who The Internet Is Or At Least Was Enthralled By."

"I... noticed the tall part. It might help if you're *not* that tall."

"Can I At Least Keep The Hat," Queen asks a little desperately. "You Seem Like A Person Who Appreciates The Value Of Good Hats."

Armed with nothing of her previous outfit save a particularly large and wide-brimmed hat, it is time at last for Queen to face her most daunting task yet: *talking* to people.

Talking, more specifically, to someone that she... *hasn't* really talked

to since their arrival in Castle Town. Ralsei may have a point.

Ralsei, however, did not contribute to nearly bringing ruin upon both the Lightners' world *and* the one they all live in, so Queen thinks she is justified in being a little... nervous, despite how incredible she knows she is. Perhaps it is better to start with those who are most likely to want to talk to her, such as her own former staff. Such as Tasque Manager and Swatch.

"You've got this," Ralsei whisper-yells from where he's hiding ineffectually along the side of a building. "Just be yourself!"

Lancer gives her an enthusiastic thumbs-up. Though it might not be an *enthusiastic* thumbs-up–it's always difficult to tell with this child–but it is definitely a thumbs-up nonetheless.

She would take a deep breath if she was organic enough to do so. She'd consume some motivational potassium if the only available source of it wasn't bananas and therefore unavailable to her in particular.

She does neither of those things. But she does step forward and very awkwardly greet both of them.

The first thing either of them does is compliment her on her hat, so– clearly, she'd at least been *close* to the right idea!

Afterward–after she's confirmed that Swatch and Tasque Manager were not in fact avoiding her, but thought that she was avoiding them, which may not have been entirely inaccurate–she flees back to where Ralsei is. He may not be a Darkner of technology, but his

opinions are different and therefore something to consider, even if she has little intention of ever seriously listening to him.

"So what did you learn from this?" Ralsei asks hopefully.

"Maybe The Real Sexypeople Were The Friends I Made Along The Way?"

He's staring at her, which isn't a good sign. He lets out a very deep sigh, which also isn't a good sign.

"I was going to say something like 'your real friends care a lot more about you than you think,'" Ralsei says at last.

"Close Enough," Queen declares. "It Rounds Up."

"It's... it's not a *number*, Queen, I don't think rounding up works like that..."

"Of Course It Does." And, on that final note, she tips her big hat from an evil resident at him and goes to find Lancer.

Except that she doesn't, because she stops after a few steps. She hesitates. There is something she *should* say here, something that she perhaps *would* say if she was anyone else. She has certain standards to uphold, as Queen.

Behind her, Ralsei just laughs. "You're welcome. Really, I was happy to help."

Thank You, she thinks.

"Potassium," she says instead and walks off.

ERROR

Written By Persy House

HOW 🔻 LONG 👎 IT ☝ HAS ✌ BEEN 💧 SINCE ❄ I 👈 FIRST ☼ CAME ☞ HERE? ✌ EACH ☹ DAY ☹ GROWS 💧 DARKER ✋ AND ☠ DARKER ❄ AS ⚐ I ❄ SLIP ¶ INTO 👈 MY 👍 OWN ⚐ MIND ☼ ONCE 👈 AGAIN. 🛍 NEV ER 🖒 AGAIN ✋ WILL 👈 I 👍 BE 👈 WHOLE. 💧 IT 💧 HAS 👍 T AKEN ✌ YEARS ❄ TO ❄ ACCEPT 👈 THIS. ☼ OR 👈 SECON DS? 👎 ON E ✌ CANNOT 👍 BE ☼ SURE. ⚐ THE 💧 NOTHING 💧 GROWS ❄ MORE ✋ FAMILIAR 💣 THAN 👈 SOMETHIN G ✌ EVE R ☠ DID. 👎 ONLY 💧 ONE 🖒 THING ✌ IS 👍 CERTAIN: 👈 I 🛍 C AN 👎 NO 👈 □ LO NG ER 💧 REACH ❄ THEM. ☼ SAN S, ⚐ ALPHYS, ☼ ASGOR E, 👈 AND 👎 ALL 🐇 THE ☼ CREATURES ¶ OF ✋ THE 💧 UNDER GRO UND ⚐ HAVE 🔻 FORGOTTEN ☠ OF 👍 ME . ☼ MY 👈 DE ATH ✌ WAS ❄ NOT ✋ UN FORSE EN. ⚐ A LL ☠ LIVING 🛍 CREATURE S ☼ MU ST 👈 D IE, 💣 IN 👈 THE 💣 E ND. 🐇 BUT 👈 TO ☼ BE 👈 ERASED 👎 FROM ⚐ TIME ☠ ITSEL F ☹ IS ☼ ANOTHE R 🐇 MATTE R. ☼ IT ✝ IS 💧 AS 🛍 IF ¶ I ✋ NEVER 💧 EXIS TED. 💣 SO ME ⚐ DAYS, 💧 I ❄ AM ☹ UNS URE ⚐ THAT ☼ I ✌ DID. ☹ I ☞ LET ⚐ THE ☹ DARK NESS ☹ BECOME ⚐ MY 🔻 ESSENCE, 👈 MY ☼ EVERYTHING. 💧 I 🛍 FORGET ❄ THE ¶ LIFE 👈 I ⚐ H AD ☠ ON ☹ THE ☼ SURFACE, ⚐ THE ☠ UNDERGROUND, 👈 THE 💧 REALITY ☹ OF 👈 THE ☞ UNIVERSE. ❄ I FEEL FEEL ❄ AS ⚐ THOUGH 🐇 I ✌ WAS 💧 BORN 😐 INTO ✋ THIS ☠ VOID, ¶ AS ✋ IF 💧 MY 🐇 VERY ☼ BEING ✋ WAS ☹ GENT LY ☹ MOLDED ✋ BY ✌ THE ☠ HANDS 👍 OF 👈 A 🛍 HOLLOW 🔻 AND ✌ APATH ETIC 💧 GOD. ✋ I ❄ DISINTEGRATE ☞ AND ✌ REFORM ✋ DAILY ☼ T O 🖋 THE 👎 WHIMS ✋ OF 👎 AN ¶ INTANGIBLE 👈 WIND, 👎 ANY 👈 ANC HOR 💧 MY 👈 BODY ☼ ONCE ✝ HAD 👈 LONG 💧 GONE. ✝ BUT 👍 MY ¶ CO MPLAINTS ✌ DIED ☞ LONG ✌ AGO, ❄ SHRIVELING 👈 UP 🖋 INTO 💧 A ✝ MASS ☼ OF 👈 DEAD ☹ SPIDERS ☼ ALONGSIDE ☠ MY ⚐ HOPE ❄ OF 🛍 ESCAPE. ¶ I ⚐ CANNOT 🔻 BEMOAN 👍 MY ⚐ EXISTENCE, ✝ FOR ☹ TO 👎 LIVE 💧 IN ✝ ANY 👍 CAPACITY ¶ IS ✌ BETTE R 🔻 THAN ⚐ TO ☠ CEASE. 👎 SURELY 👈 IT ☼ MUST ☞ BE, ✝ RIGHT? ☹ OR 💣 SHOULD ✋ I ☠ GI VE 👎 UP? 👈 YOU ✌ CAN ☼ TELL ☠ ME 💧 THE ✝ TRUTH. 👍 I ¶ WILL ✌ NOT 👍 BEGRUDGE ☼ ANY ✝ ANSWER 👈 YOU ☹ GIVE. 👈 HOW ☠ COULD 👎 I, 🖋 WHEN ✋ 💧 YOU 💣 ARE 🖒 THE ⚐ ONLY 💧 ONE 💧 WHO ✋ SEES 🐇 ME? ☹ YOU 👈 DO 🛍 SEE ¶ ME, ¶ RIGHT? □ THE 💧 OTHERS ¶ CAN ¶ HEAR 🛍 ME. ¶ FEEL 👈 ME. ✋ BUT 💧 ONLY 💧 YOU 🖒 CAN 👈 SEE ✌ 😐 ME. ☠ MY ☝ FRIEND, ⚐ ONLY ☞ YOUR ✝ PRESENCE 💧 GIVES ☠ ME ⚐ HOPE. 🔻 FOR 🛍 WHAT ✌ IS ☠ A 👎 GAME ⚐ WITHOUT ☞ TS □ PLAYER? 🔻 WHAT ¶ IS ⚐ A ✌ STORY ☝ WITHOUT ✌ ITS ✋ READER? ☠ WITH 🖋 YOU 💧 HERE, 🖒 I 👈 KNOW ✌ 😐 THERE IS ☠ HOPE. ☝ THE ⚐ PRESENCE ☞ OF □ A 🛍 VIEWER ✝ PUTS ✝ 👈 THE ☼ PLOT ☼ IN 🛍 MOTION, ✝ ALLOWS 👈 THE ☼ UNTHINKABLE ☼ TO 🛍 OCCUR. ✝ THE 👈 CLIMAX ☼ NEVER ☼ COMES 🛍 IN ✋ THE ☠ PRELUDE. ❄ AND 👈 THOUGH ☼ I 👈 WAS 💧 GONE ❄ LONG ✋ BEFORE ☠ YOUR ☝ TIME, 🛍 I ❄ HAVE ¶ NOT 👈 BEEN 👎 FORGOTTEN. ✌ ☼ 😐 NOT 💧 BY 🖒 MY ☼ CREATOR, 👈 NOR ✌ BY 👎 YOU, 💧 MY ✝ FRIEND. 👈 MY ☼ TIME ☼ WILL 🚘 COME. ✝ AND 👈 I ☼ BELIEVE ☼ IT 💧 WILL ⚐ BE ⚐ VERY, ☠ VERY 🛍 INTERESTING.

#spoilers #undertale

FRAGILE
Nyantendo
Nook
DO NOT STACK

MOGAMI
KEIJI

number one fan

Written By glownary

Reigen's foot tapped anxiously against the tiled floor. Things were finally going back to normal at the Spirits and Such Consultation Office, but he couldn't shake the sinking feeling of dread after his television appearances. Recognition of greatness was something he had craved for a very long time–but he didn't couldn't stomach the amount of criticism he must be facing online at that very moment. Most people believed he was psychic again after Mob made the cameras float, but surely someone out there had to be questioning why he fumbled the television show so badly if he was truly gifted with powers...

That dread was why he initially felt his heart rate spike at the sight of his own face in the thumbnail of a video, discovered while scrolling the social media feed of his secret side account. Would this be his final moment of truth? Had the other shoe finally dropped?

The video had no caption. It had already garnered thousands of likes and hundreds of shares despite being posted just a few hours ago. Strangely, the uploader's icon seemed to be... another picture of him from the press conference?

Curiosity and hope took hold of Reigen's willpower. He clicked the play button.

His senses were immediately assaulted by loud music blasting through his computer's speakers and numerous jump cuts of his television appearances spliced together. The song's lyrics were in English, so he turned the volume down and tried to focus on the visuals, but there seemed to be no real rhyme or reason to the way the video was edited–it jumped from one clip of him quickly gesturing and gesturing and

smooth-talking to the next. It was zoomed in on just him, too, even in the shots from the first TV show, cropping out all others from view.

Well... it didn't seem negative, at least? Reigen rubbed his chin before deciding to check out the replies, hoping they would provide more context and explain why someone would edit a video of him in such a manner.

He was shocked to find that half of the replies were from different accounts that also used his likeness as a profile picture. He scrolled down the reply thread, a dazed grin slowly spreading across his face with each passing comment. Was this really happening?

KYAAA!! MY HUSBAND! >///<

AMAZING EDIT!

he's so cuteeeee 😊

i love watching him sweat ♡

PERFECT INCREDIBLE SHOWSTOPPING MIND BLOWING

Eminem and Reigen, great combo! ♡

...On and on and on, the replies were filled with absolute fawning adoration for him. This wasn't the end of the line as he feared, far from it. He had *fans!* A veritable community of adoring fans, lavishing him with loving comments. Some of those comments were a little bit strange–like the one about him sweating–and he didn't know who Eminem was, but that didn't matter one bit to him; the attention was clearly positive and he was *thrilled*.

Craving more praise, Reigen clicked on the profile of the fan who posted the video. He was immediately greeted with the sight of many different photo and video edits of himself. Some had extra elements included, like little spinning hearts, or roses framing his face.

"What's got you so happy this early in the morning?"

Reigen glanced up from his computer to find Dimple floating a few feet away. The amorphous green ghost was often his only companion whenever Mob was busy at school. Reigen gave him a smug smile.

"Just basking in the glow of all my admiring fans," he answered.

"Your what?" Dimple squinted at him, unimpressed. "Who would ever want to be your fan?"

Ouch. Reigen's smile twitched, but he quickly recovered–he had irrefutable proof of the existence of his admirers, after all. He leaned back in his chair with his arms folded behind his head, giving Dimple ample room to float over and get a good view of the screen. "Judging by the follower count of @reigenlover69? Thousands of people."

Dimple's expression turned incredulous. He joined Reigen on the other side of the computer and narrowed his eyes at the screen. "...What the hell is this?"

"According to their bio, it's a 'stan account.' They love me so much that they make little videos of me to music. Look, they have over five thousand followers!" Sure enough, the follower count was over five thousand. Dimple didn't seem to pay that fact any mind, though, instead opting to scroll through their posts and look at the replies. "Speechless, are you? I understand. You're in the presence of a celebrity psychic, after all."

"Uh. Reigen, this doesn't feel very flattering to me."

"Pssh, what?" Reigen leaned forward in his chair, taking another look at the screen. "What're you talking about? They're in love with me!"

"Yeah, they like you alright. I just don't think this is the kind of attention you were hoping for." Dimple scrolled back up to a photo edit he had already passed by. "Like, this one. They edited cat ears and a tail onto you. All the replies are calling you a... little meow meow? It's embarrassing."

"Well," Reigen scratched his head at the baffling image of himself. "They're certainly creative. I think it's just some internet fan culture thing I'm not familiar with. Unusual habits aside, they're still my fans!"

"Take it from a guy who ran a cult, I know what fans are like. None of these people think you're cool, Reigen. I guess you could call them fans, but it's just a bunch of teenage girls who find you endearingly pathetic."

Reigen frowned. "They do say that green is the color of jealousy... Why must you tear me down so, Dimple? I would have let you into my fan club."

"*Wh–you!*" Dimple's nebulous body contorted away from him. "As if I'd ever want to be a member! And here I was ready to comfort you about how pitiful everyone finds you. Whatever. Enjoy your freaky groupies and the weird shit that they make of you."

"Aha! You wanted to comfort me to prove your loyalty as my number one fan! I see right through you, Dimple. Literally and metaphorically."

Dimple groaned and began to float away, straight through the nearest wall. "I am *not* your fan!" was the last thing he said before phasing through the solid drywall.

"Always has to get the last word..." Reigen muttered under his breath. It was impossible to win an argument with Dimple, considering how easily he could make a sudden exit through any material.

Neither Dimple nor the online fangirls were Reigen's biggest supporters, though, and he knew it. That title was taken by somebody else. With a small smile, Reigen texted a link to one of the photo edits—one where he was surrounded by roses and glittery stars—to Mob. He was always a good boy—he didn't check his texts during classes. He would see it eventually.

By the time Mob's lunch period had rolled around, Reigen was busy bullshitting his way through a sales pitch to a potential new client. He didn't hear his phone buzz as he received a text back from his number one fan:

(づ ᴗ _ᴗ)づ♡

19
JUNE

HA HA HA

EQUAL TO HEAVEN

the fairly odd scientists

Written By Neuro

Colress is at home here among the machines–the hurried whirring, the fluttering blink of dot-sized lights, and the refrigerated room temperatures all feel like his habitat, if one were to assign such names. He could get lost in the towering hunks of hyper-intelligent metal, and if he never found his way out, he'd be at peace. This brand new laboratory he stands in is certainly *different* from the one he'd worked in during his time on the Plasma Frigate, but he can't complain. All laboratories are beautiful things, no doubt!

He walks around the main room of the cavernous lab, taking note of data flickering on screens and reading printouts he passes by. Everything seems to be in order, he thinks.

It's around this point that his lab partner stirs, though his movements can barely be heard over the buzzing ambiance. Colress chuckles lightly–in his own scientific stupor, he'd almost forgotten just who this fascinating facility belonged to! He pulls a document that has just finished printing from its dispensing slot and clears his throat.

"Denzel, my friend–these readings appear optimal, just as you'd predicted!"

Colress' associate perks up at the report. He swivels around and stands to approach Colress, reaching for the paper. Colress hands it to him with a grin, waiting as the data is given another look over.

"Hmm, yes, optimal indeed..." mutters Denzel Crocker, glaring concentratedly at the paper in his hand. "With this kind of output, it should be all I need to create the ultimate machine! One that can

#pokémon #fairly oddparents

finally capture and show to the world... Timmy Turner's own...!"

"FAIRY GODPARENTS!"

As Crocker screeches those two words, twitching in time with them in morbid emphasis, Colress shrugs lightly. "Denzel, it would be kind of you to remember that it isn't just you at the helm of this operation," he chastises, taking the paper from Crocker's now tightly-balled fist. "*We* are working to capture these fairies, no? Do recall that my contributions allowed you to solve those equations..."

Crocker grunts. "Yes, yes, I know," he says dismissively, trudging over to a table littered with machine parts. "I don't need you to start nagging me with reminders! Mother already does that enough!"

Colress adjusts his glasses thoughtfully as he joins Crocker at the table. "Oh, be kind to her, won't you? Dolores is really a sweet woman."

"That woman is a beast! A beast, I tell you! All she does is look for ways to ruin my plans. She wants me to see misery for the rest of my days!"

"Don't be that way, Denzel. Dolores and I had a lovely chat over coffee the other day about the upcoming science symposium at Dimmsdale Town Hall," Colress recounts, smiling. "She promised to get me in contact with some of the more notable scientists if I were to take her out again."

"Stop taking my mother out on dates! That cougar will take any man she can get!"

Colress can't suppress a laugh. "Denzel, really, you are too easy to fire up," he jests. "You will need to keep yourself under control if we are to retrieve those fairies for examination, yes?"

For the most part, Colress likes to think that he's past his days of total villainy–working with an absolute monster showed him the less ideal sides of the profession–but he *also* knows that science does not take sides. Science is science, and if one day he happens to end up in a strange world propositioned by an insane teacher to research a child's fairy godparents, well, you only live once, right?

Truthfully, he isn't sure how he ended up in Dimmsdale, but he ultimately chalks it up to another one of his Colress Machines malfunctioning. A good handful of them dabble in alternate realities, so if one shoots him somewhere he's never seen before, it isn't like it's completely out of the blue. Either way, he was *more* than eager to explore new terrain (as well as the new creatures that came with it), so someone like Crocker, an expert in the field, crossing paths with him simply had to be more than coincidence.

From what Crocker has told him, there are magical fairies in this world, which he doesn't have trouble believing. What he *does* find hard to believe is that Crocker only knows of two (whom both belong to a child of ten years) and wants to *steal* them in order to examine them... but again, Colress was always morally gray. So long as there are experiments to be had, he can't possibly turn an opportunity like this down.

Colress is shaken from his reminiscence when Crocker begins cackling. "I've done it! This machine is complete!" he shouts triumphantly, holding up what looks like a medium-sized plastic storage container. Colress offers a small bout of applause.

"Very good, Denzel," Colress says. "Now that we have finished everything up, shall we go test what we have created?"

Crocker looks wild–though his *own* inventions tended to fail, this one was created with the assistance of a well-to-do scientist (who had a grasp on what fairies actually were). Surely this plan would go right! Surely now!

"Yes, Colress. We shall..."

Timmy Turner knows that every day in Crocker's class is a battle, and not simply because of all the F's. Despite the mutual hatred between student and teacher (that Timmy is *sure* bleeds into how harshly Crocker grades him), he's forced to acknowledge that Crocker is the only one who actually caught on to the existence of his fairies. Even though everyone else thought Crocker was nuts for it and never believed him, Timmy has to tread carefully; Crocker's insanity actually gives him an edge in fairy hunting.

Somehow, though, today feels strangely off. He isn't sure what it is that makes him feel this way, but he's clearly feeling it enough that it's concerning to his fairies. As Timmy stands outside of the school, staring at the double doors, his fairies–disguised as pink and green groundhogs–pop out of the ground.

"What's the matter, Timmy?" the pink groundhog, Wanda, inquires. "You usually start reconsidering life decisions once you're *in* the school."

"Yeah!" the green groundhog, Cosmo, supplies. "And it's usually because of one of Francis' atomic wedgies!"

Timmy's brows furrow and his buck teeth worry his lip. "I dunno, guys. Something just feels really weird about today. More than other days."

"Like how, sport?" asks Wanda. Cosmo, meanwhile, runs off to chase after a squirrel.

"Well, like something really bad's gonna happen. Something that's super, totally terrible. Something way worse than anything that stupid Crocker could do alone!"

"Are you saying he's getting help from someone?"

"Maybe," Timmy replies, finally mustering up enough courage to push open the doors and tread to his potential doom, "but who would help that crazy dude anyway?"

"Good day, students. I am Doctor Colress, and I will be helping Mister Crocker with class today."

Colress folds his hands behind his back, pleased to finally see their plan set in motion. From Crocker's description of his target, it's easy to spot him among the class–buck teeth, pink hat, incredibly sweaty disposition. As Crocker goes on about the day's pop quiz–the diversion that would allow for fairy collection–Colress focuses on Timmy. The boy's gaze keeps flicking between Crocker, Colress, and his colorful school supplies.

Colress tried not to make his investigation obvious, but he knew that those school supplies were the likely suspects. There was a pink pencil and a green eraser (that looks as though it's been mauled extensively by some small creature. If he has to guess, perhaps this world's equivalent of a Skwovet?). Smiling, he snaps his fingers to grab Timmy's attention.

"Mister Turner, it would be good of you to listen to Mister Crocker while he talks, yes?" he says in a tone that draws ire from Timmy. "After all, you do not want to miss his instructions."

"Thank you, Doctor Colress," Crocker pipes up, drawing *more* ire from Timmy.

"As I was *saying,* class, today we have a pop quiz!" Crocker smiles a truly dreadful smile that seems to turn the room colder. "However, I've noticed some of you *wretched* children have been *cheating*... what with your pencils writing down answers, only to use your erasers to change them later when you know the answer! That is inexcusable!"

Colress takes the moment to pull out a large plastic tub. Aside from the fact that it has "PROPERTY OF MR. CROCKER" scrawled all over it in black marker, it looks like an otherwise normal tub."However, Mister Crocker wanted to take a different approach than just giving everyone failing grades," he suggests with a wag of his finger. "We will be providing our own supplies for you children to use–including, ah... what was it again, Mister Crocker...?"

"Why, only the finest pencils and erasers from when I was a lad... *IN THE 1970'S*!" Crocker cackles evilly as Colress begins taking up supplies and distributing the plants. "These erasers are hard enough to crack your teeth! One of them even poked Mother's eye out! Good luck changing your answers now, foolish children! Heh heh! Haah hah hah hah!"

Timmy, Colress notes quickly, looks panicked. The boy knows that Colress has now seen his "supplies," and can't get rid of them without arousing suspicion. He sees Timmy size up the box he's holding and whispers something to his pencil and eraser–boy, does he benefit from being an outsider in a world where that's normal–before trying to look somewhat calm.

Colress strolls up to Timmy last, holding out the box for him to deposit his supplies. "Mister Turner, if you would be so kind?" he offers, smiling gently. He wonders, with quiet elatedness, how a fairy turns into a pencil. Does it hurt to sharpen it? Will they die if you break it in half? So many questions, all with answers closer than he dared make obvious.

"Uh, Doctor Colress? Are you gonna give me Crocker's old pencil or what?"

Blinking back into reality, Colress shakes his head. "Do excuse me, Mister Turner. I was merely thinking about how I am going to adhere to Mister Crocker's grading scale. I hear he is a particularly harsh grader." It's a great save, but Timmy looks upset. "Oh, don't you worry. I promise to go easier than he does!"

After he gives Timmy one of Crocker's decrepit pencils, Colress turns on his heel and makes his way toward the exit–just as Crocker told him to do. Sparing a glance over his shoulder shows Timmy looking mildly smug, which he knows is because whatever he's told his fairies to do is about to occur. Better safe than sorry, Colress thinks, and he subtly taps a button on the underside of the tub.

The tub shudders lightly, then clicks; it looks no different than before, save for a small light on the lid blinking alive. Crocker can barely stifle his maniacal laughter as a generous amount of fairy dust suddenly puffs from between the crevices of the tub lid, then again after a few moments. Timmy's confusion is writ plain across his buck-toothed face, and even Colress has to tap a hand to his lips in a sudden bout of high spirits.

"Mister Turner," Colress chides on his way out the door, "please focus on your test. Mister Crocker and I will ensure that these materials will be out of reach until the end of the quiz."

Crocker's howls of laughter can be heard throughout the school,

echoing his pure malice throughout each expansive, under-funded hallway.

"We've done it! Finally! After all of these years, *finally!*"

After some time transporting the fairies into an anti-magic chamber, Crocker and Colress are finally able to reap the fruits of their labor. Crocker's face is pressed to the glass, startling the captive Cosmo and Wanda. Colress, meanwhile, writes notes furiously on a clipboard, examining what he can around Crocker's impossibly angular head.

"Eek!" Cosmo whimpers, cowering in the corner of the small chamber. "Now Crocker and that guy with the big forehead are looking at us funny! I didn't know I was gonna be looked at this hard! I haven't even put on makeup yet!"

"Cosmo, you don't *wear* makeup," Wanda returns, momentarily forgetting the situation they were in.

"You don't know that!"

Crocker's heavy breathing silences the fairies' quarrel, and they both stare on in fear. "Good, good... get worked up! I want all of your magic, fairies..." Crocker mutters. Colress approaches him and gently tries to push him aside.

"Excuse me, Crocker, I would like to examine the fairies a little," Colress requests simply, only to be swatted backward by Crocker. Shocked, he pauses his writing. "Er? Why did you...?"

"Back away, Dorkus Maximus! These fairies are mine, I tell you! *MINE*!" Crocker barks, shoving his body against the anti-magic chamber protectively. "This magic's all for me, so keep your distance, buster!"

Colress is doing well not to give away how he's feeling, but the fingers of his writing hand have begun to worry the pen clutched within them. "Crocker," he begins, voice unwaveringly flat, "let me remind you that it is only because of our collaboration that we have these fairies. Allowing me to make observations, as all good scientists desire, is the very least you can do."

Crocker hisses at him in response like a snake. Colress blinks, trying to process that his supposed science partner has just hissed at him. When he finishes processing both the hissing and the fact that Crocker was going back on their agreement, he smiles coolly.

"Hmm, I see. It is quite unfortunate that you are taking this route, Crocker, my friend," Colress sighs, backing away from Crocker and flicking out a small panel hidden in his coat. He taps a few times, swipes once, and suddenly the anti-magic chamber shuts off. Crocker screeches a horrible noise when Cosmo and Wanda realize they are able to escape and promptly fly out of reach. "It is a good thing you are not the first person I have worked with that I lost interest in. Overrides are such a wonderful command, no?"

"You! What—what are you doing?!" Crocker howls. "My fairies! D'aagh! *My fairieeeees!!*"

As Crocker wails and chases the fairies futilely, Colress taps his pen to his cheek. He tilts his head up to meet the eyes of Cosmo and Wanda, who seem to be having fun at Crocker's demise. "Excuse me, fairies," he says. "I understand that you grant wishes through magic. Would it be possible to witness this just once?"

Wanda looks apprehensive, but Cosmo easily brushes it aside. "Oh, come on, Wanda, this story's gonna get retconned anyways!

Granting one wish shouldn't hurt, right?"

Wanda still looks unconvinced. "It depends what the wish is," she mutters.

"I wish for a bear that will chase Crocker," Colress states.

"A bear?"

"Yes."

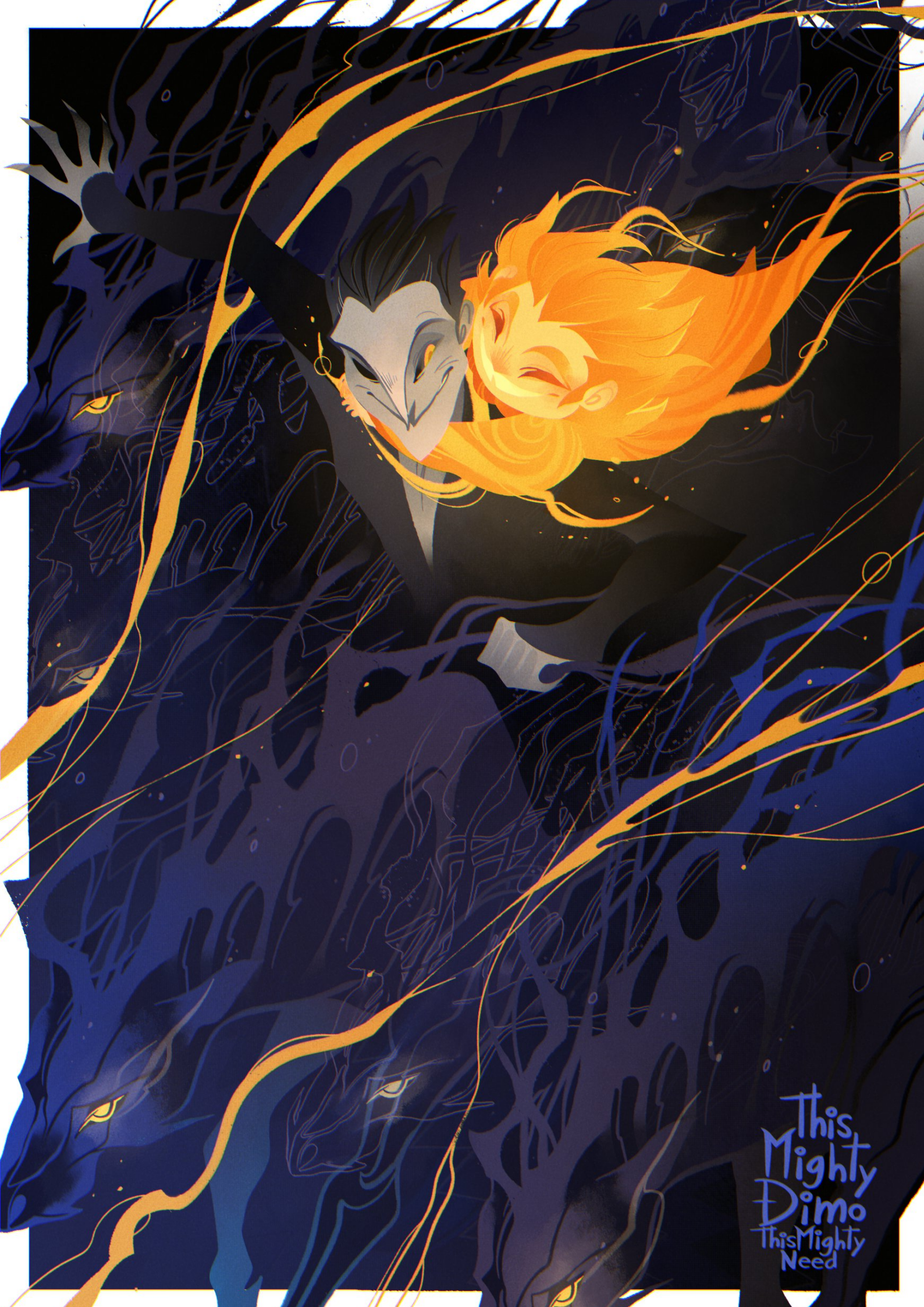
Cosmo scratches his head. "Wouldn't you want a beaker or something? To keep all your science in?"

"I am perfectly capable of containing my science. The bear, please."

Cosmo and Wanda both shrug. "Good enough for us!"

With a swing of their wands, a standard brown bear appears from nothing. It roars and rushes Crocker, who screams and flees. Colress watches the debacle, sighing and reluctantly waving the fairies goodbye. He knows that with their liberation comes escape... and while he does want to investigate them a little more, he knows the fairy dust he'd collected in secret will serve him more than enough in the meantime.

It sure is great to be a scientist.


This Mighty Dimo
This Mighty Need

SUMMER
HATER
TNT

easybakerice

BOB
Boy's N' Grills

let the dead play witness

Written By osaguero

The following piece contains spoilers for Six of Crows. Skip !

On the worst days, he drowns.

It starts with a trickle, frigid tendrils tugging at his ankles, soaking through the tips of his boots and into his bones. A slow-acting poison. Gentle at first, like an old friend, before the tides begin to rise in earnest and the panic sets in, heart thrumming against his ribcage, a prisoner in a cage of his own making. Dead skin clumps underneath his fingernails as he claws to the surface, water pouring down his throat, bubbling up in his lungs. Until the spell breaks, and reality trickles in slowly, sounds and sights and smells overloading his senses, a dull ringing in his ears, eyes burning with some unidentifiable emotion he quickly bites back.

A monotonous, bone-weary cycle he could count on. Whether the trigger be the brush of bare skin or the mere act of closing his eyes, it was always the same. One of two constants in his life: the water and the rage.

A mysterious buyer, boatloads of kruge, a deceptively easy task. Kill one man. Simple in it of itself; complex in its execution. An isolated Shu Han palace, perched on the side of a towering peak, accessible only by a single road, guarded by thousands of reanimated khergud soldiers. Get in, kill, get out. Weeks of careful planning, of laying out every possible complication, and coming up with backup plans for the backup plans. Kaz was nothing if not meticulous. All had gone smoothly.

And Kaz was about to screw it all up. It was one thing to take a nearly mission-derailing trip to visit the subject of his all-

#gore warning #six of crows

consuming thirst for vengeance; it was another to freeze. To look the undead in the eye, to gaze up at canvassed wings, a patchwork of fabric and flesh, and see your own eyes reflected back.

The water rises.

His fingers spasm.

The dull clatter of his gun against the cobble does nothing to break the spell.

He knows it isn't possible. But that crooked smile, that snaggletooth curling over thin lips, the same deep-set gaze he sees when he looks into a mirror, they're all there. A haunting truth hovers before him, and all he can do is stare.

He barely blinks as the khergud barrels into him, as a sharp pain jolts through his bad leg, as his cane rolls out of arm's reach. He's unarmed, cornered, metal pressing into his jugular, but all he can do is memorize the face he thought he'd forgotten. That he thought he'd never see again.

He'd like to say Jordie was a sight for sore eyes. Kaz Rietveld would believe that lie. He'd have collapsed into his brother's arms like no time had passed, like the swindle and the plague and the violence had never occurred.

Kaz Brekker knew better than to believe in magic. He knew the khergud were merely a shell of the living, a crude estimation of humanity meant to snuff out the magic in others. How cruel it was, that even in death, Jordan Rietveld remained a puppet to the powers that be. To those with more money, more influence, more cruelty, who were willing to dirty their hands with the blood of others to see their ambitions fulfilled. People like Kaz.

The blade at his throat breaks the skin. The pain drags him back from the depths, reaching down like a hand to pull him up and out of the flood of memories threatening to sweep him away. He swallows hard, drags his gaze across his brother's face, forcing himself to see nothing but a monster, a creature, a tool.

His hands shake as he knocks the knife aside, grasping the hilt and plunging it into a chink in the khergud's metallic skin, as red gushes over his fist, as he scrambles backward, blood spraying across his face.

It's the messiest kill he's had in a long time.

He typically kills with ruthless efficiency. Unless, of course, he wants it to hurt.

He doesn't want this one to hurt. But he knows it still will.

Haphazard slashes to its body fail. It's probably due to the fact that he can't bring himself to turn his head, to let their eyes meet again. He swears he still sees a spark behind them, Jordie's spirit in that slightly crooked nose, that tiny scar running through one eyebrow from an accident on the farm involving a rake and a game of tag gone awry.

He ends up sprawled across the top of the creature, legs spread wide to pin its wings down, both hands twisted around its throat, forced by the position to look it dead in the face, to come to the realization that the brother he buried long ago would be entombed once more thanks to his own ministrations. An ugly ache builds its way up from his stomach, crawling up his spine, sending him shuddering as his hands tighten, as the monster slows, limbs going limp.

For good measure, Kaz twists the knife buried in its chest so it burrows deeper, gritting his teeth as it hits bone before practically throwing himself as far away as possible, eyes plastered open. He forces himself to blink.

His eyelashes are wet.

There's a faint wheezing coming from somewhere, a high-pitched whistle. He's vaguely aware that it's coming from him. He hears his own heartbeat fluttering against his skull, too fast, too frantic, breaths coming in shallow, useless gasps. He knows he has to get up, rejoin the others, meet up with Jesper and Wylan; he was supposed to be the one dispatching the target.

Fingers fumble across the ground until they feel the grooves of a crow's head. Familiar. Grounding.

He's only just stumbled to his feet when Wylan rounds the corner, eyes going wide as he takes in the scene before him. Kaz is sure he sees right through him. The merchling has always been too perceptive for his own good.

But Wylan says nothing, only pausing to take a gun from a fallen soldier and toss it to Kaz before running further into the palace. The rest of the mission is a blur. Thinking back on it, Kaz barely remembers a thing. Only that he'd ended the target with more savagery than usual, bashing his head against the marble until his eyes fluttered shut and breathing stopped.

He waited until the others were out of sight before he threw up.

He hadn't killed that weak little kid after all.

Wylan and Jesper become a constant in the Crow Club. He's sure it isn't a coincidence; he's been made. His leg aches more than normal and he sees his brother in every kill. He dreams of Jordie's pulse slowing beneath his fingertips, of the light coming back into his eyes just as Kaz twists the knife.

Sometimes he speaks to him, cruelty spilling from his lips in ways it never did in life.

Nightmares escape the night and haunt him in the day; he's started to talk to a man that's not there.

Rest eludes him; he closes his eyes but lies awake the whole night.

Years of progress, of practiced suppression and careful callousness, gone in seconds. He couldn't believe how pitiful he really was, underneath the mask he wore. He'd been getting better, opening up, taking risks, trusting. This was a regression, he knew it. He couldn't even hide it. He saw how Wylan looked at him. The pity.

He hated pity.

After Jordie died, he vowed never to need help from anyone again. Needing help is what led his brother to his demise and almost cost Kaz his life. To have someone look down on you, and think that you needed their help, was the worst feeling he'd ever experienced. So he donned his gloves and dirtied his hands, content to be a demon if it meant people looked up at him instead of down.

Cruelty was comfortable. Compassion wasn't. So, he buried his cares in harsh words and blatant lies, keeping everyone at arm's length for fear of giving them an opening to stick a knife in his back. Constantly being alert, treating sleep like a danger, and rest like a curse. If only he wasn't human, like the rumors suggested. It would be easier.

"Kaz," Jesper sits beside him, spinning a coin between his fingers, pistols strapped to his waist. "Are you—" He bites down on his lip, clenching his eyes, steeling himself. "You know I can handle this job myself. There's no need—"

"Jesper." Kaz flicks the coin out of Jesper's hand and slams it down hard on the tabletop. "Are you questioning my decision?"

It says something about how far they've come that Jesper doesn't retract the statement or cower back, but instead leans forward and

places a hand on his shoulder. He feels its warmth through his jacket, a shudder trembling down his spine. He's so sensitive these days. He hates it. He could wrap himself in layers upon layers of clothing and it still wouldn't be enough.

"Yes. I am." Jesper squeezes. "After the Shu Han mission, I—"

"You what," Kaz growls, slapping his hand away and standing abruptly. The chair screeches away from him with such force that it falls over. He isn't able to suppress the way he recoils at the noise it makes when it hits the floor. Jesper's eyes narrow, filled with pity, such disgusting, revolting pity that it makes him feel sick. "We're both going tomorrow morning. Non-negotiable."

Jesper's brow furrows like he's holding something back. He grits his teeth.

"Fine."

Kaz sits at his desk, face and clothes caked in dried blood, head in his hands, nails digging furrows into his scalp with such ferocity that crimson wells up in their wake. That's how Inej finds him. She wasn't supposed to return for several weeks. He appreciates how she makes her steps heavy as she walks over to perch on the windowsill, because with how he's been recently, he probably would've shot at her the second she spoke.

He doesn't bother lifting his head. Can't really find the strength to. She probably knows it all anyways, Jesper and Wylan telling her everything that him not showing up at the docks to greet her didn't already give away. None of them know what Jordie looked like, but they know there's only one thing that sets him off like this.

“Inej,” he manages to grind out, sounding far too cold and far too angry.

“Kaz,” her braid swings over her shoulder as she turns to face him, one leg dangling outside the building and her back pressed up against the brick. How he’s missed her.

He never liked for her, or anyone else for that matter, to see him like this. But he’d push through it. Because it’s what she deserved. He just didn’t know how much he could give her right now.

His cane clacks against the floor as he stands, making his way over to her, gloved hands trembling as he reaches out to touch her face. He sees the momentary flash of hurt in her eyes as she feels the fabric instead of his flesh, but she recovers quickly, gaze softening. She’s beautiful; she always is. But he sees the dark circles under her eyes, the way her hair is disheveled and escaping her braid, the sheen of sweat upon her brow. She’d rushed here. She’d been worried.

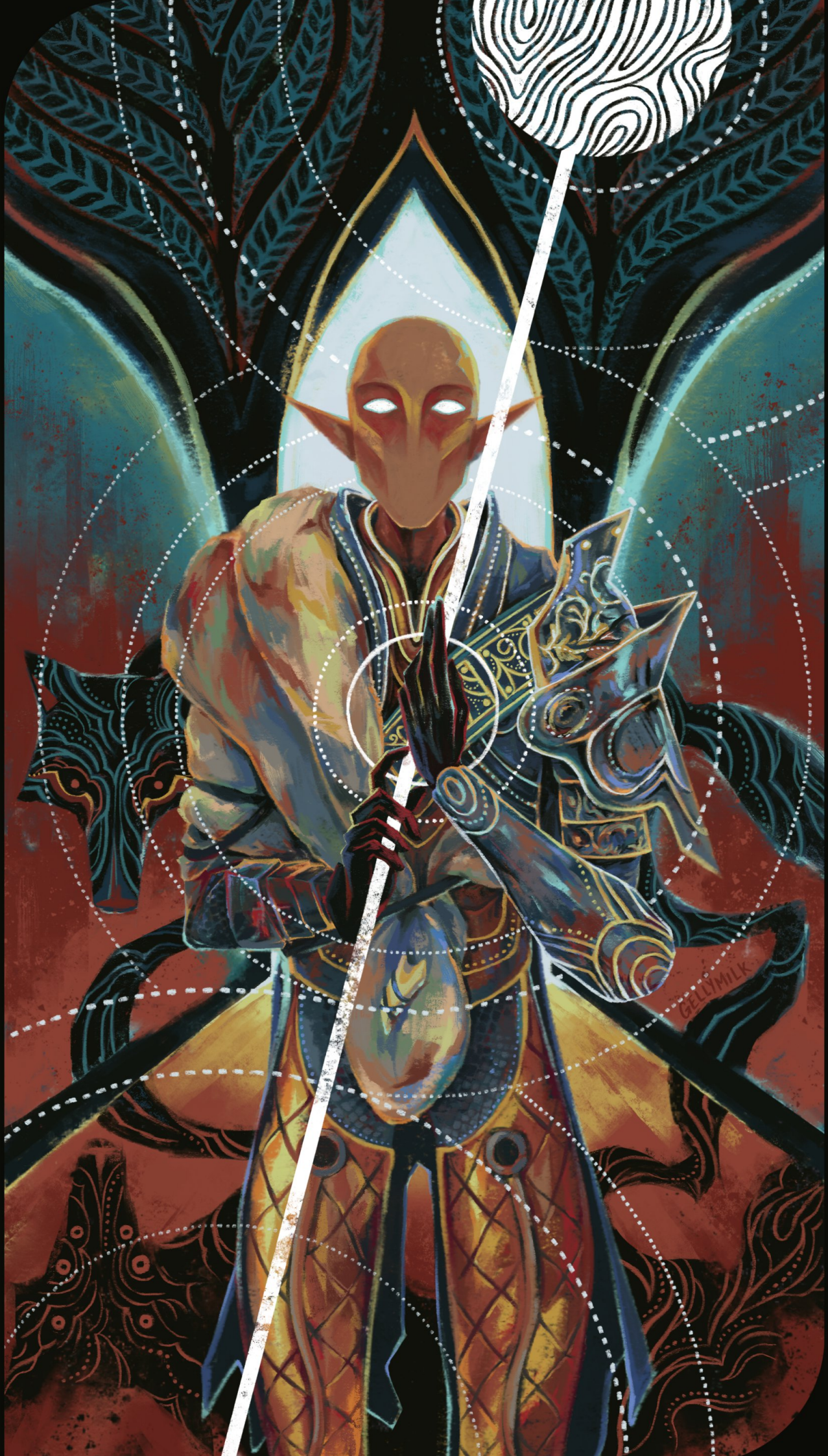
He has to resist the urge to pretend all is well. She knows him, and can see right through his facade without problem. He can’t fool her. So he takes off a glove and runs his fingertips over the scrape on her cheek, choking down nausea and turning away when he knows he can’t hold it in anymore, stumbling to the bucket he’s kept by his bedside for the past week. His head feels fuzzy. He thinks he might pass out.

He knew it was bad, but not like this. What would’ve been easy for him a month ago was more of a struggle than it had been when they first met. Inej hovers behind him, unsure of whether to reach out or stay put. The gloves go back on. They stare at each other, a fissure between them that he desperately wants to close, but knows he isn’t capable of it right now. He promised her a man without armor, and here he is having donned it again. But her smile is soft, and her hands gentle as she touches his back, careful to avoid his skin.

They'd get back to where they had been. Though he wished recovery was linear, he found himself walking in circles, moving forward and falling back, sinking into her embrace and pushing her away. But he meant it with all of his heart, that he would and could change for her.

She deserved the world. And no matter how tiny the steps they took toward each other were, they would get there eventually. He knew they both had their inhibitions, their scars, that she was just as broken as he. That's why they fit so well together, filling in each other's cracks to create a perfectly imperfect whole.

With her, he believed anything was possible. The fact that she came back for him said it all. They were in this together. He would always have his Wraith. And she would always have him.


GELLYMILK

Two Spinels (And a Merchant's Plan to Wager Them)

Written By Paul

Lilac flames sprouted from tall torches, licking against the stone pillars that sat behind me, acting as my backrest. I yawned underneath my mask, blinking away tiredness. It had been a long day within the recesses of a Spanish castle, hauling my large bags of weapons and goodies to each new hideout. Nowadays, my only customers were local villagers, yet recently, a stranger had taken fancy to the small island. He blasted through place after place while shedding bullets as if they grew on trees. Business had *never* been better, pesetas pouring from his pockets and into mine to trade for all sorts of goods and weapons. For all the work I've had to do within the past several hours, I *needed* to give myself a break once in a while, and now was the perfect time.

...Until my rest was interrupted by the *slam* of a door.

I peeked from under my shadowed hood to look over at the sudden commotion. As expected, the new customer had barged in, wiping grime from his thin body armor while heaving for breath. He was blonde with a short cut that would obscure his eyesight at the wrong angle, as well as a simplistic dark outfit cluttered with his assortment of weapons. Accompanying him was an unfamiliar young lass with matching blonde hair and a battered jacket and skirt. They both struggled to compose themselves, the woman more so, as the man walked over to my small pop-up station.

I chuckled, rising from my stool to meet the duo. "Aah, break's over, I suppose."

#resident evil 4

The stranger pulled out his own goods, dropping them on the table with a noticeable thud. He did not need to say more.

I quickly started trading various trinkets for bags of pesetas with the hurried customer. We easily fell into our usual routine of upgrading his weapons and selling him more goods, built up over our hours together. Like clockwork, the man started window shopping, eyeing each weapon on display behind me. First, the cleaned-up Broken Butterfly, then the furbished Blacktail nestled next to the brand new Stingray I had just picked up a few days prior. His eyes pored over the 10,000 pesetas weapon, then to another three times its price. Indecisive looks persisted when a scoff left my lips.

"Havin' trouble picking, stranga'?"

The blonde briefly shot me a pointed look I'd long since grown accustomed to.

Taking his glare for an answer, I said, "Well, I have plenty o' goods. Rememba' that I still have my spinel shelf."

A shift of my heavily robed person revealed a shelf behind me, hosting a collection of various trinkets; maps, weapons, and whatnot. Almost immediately, the blonde's eyes widened and zeroed in on a particular item.

"That."

Intrigued, I followed his gaze, landing on the small yet simple silver handgun resting in a stand on the shelf.

"Ahh, sights set on the Matilda?"

The smallest shift of the other's eye gave me my answer, almost one of urgency. To not let the man wait, I delicately lifted the gun, careful to not smudge the polish I gave it earlier that afternoon.

"This is a *fine* choice, stranga'. This may seem like a standard handgun to anyone unskilled, but when attached to its stock, it can shoot up to three bullets in a single burst. Howeva', it can only show its real potential with the right shoota'."

My words seemed to resonate with the man, his eyes scanning the weapon. Each time I turned the gun to show off its intricacies, his eyes narrowed further in an attempt to mask the growing tinkle they bore. It was subtle, but it gave me the impression that something was collecting in his expression.

The maiden next to him watched the gun in my hand with intrigue, a small smile bringing light to her dirtied face. "Wait... did you say three rounds...?"

I returned her expression with a masked smile, "With a gun like this, dozens of foes can fall in minutes."

A small gasp sounded from the girl, eyes blown wide. "Dozens–?"

"Yes, ma'am. Dozens."

As if I spoke in *diamonds*, she swiveled her head to the distracted stranger. "Leon–! That could really help us... It sounds better than your current gun."

The other turned his head, hand ghosting over his small SG-09R. "Hey, I didn't–"

"Ah, in need o' an upgrade?" I chimed in.

“Hold it, robes,” The man shot yet another glare toward me (with a gaze like his, he didn’t even need guns to kill). “I haven’t said anything about my own handgun.”

“And I ain’ said nothin’ about replacin’ it.”

He paused for a moment, then sighed in defeat. “...How much?”

My smile widened with pride as I rubbed an exposed thumb over the grip. “I’d have to ask ya’ for ten spinels, stranga’.”

The man grimaced as he scoured through a side pocket, the clinks of pesetas decorating the air, calculating how much he had left to spend. The silence was telling for an unlucky traveler.

“Runnin’ short?”

“By two,” he growled.

“Ahh...” I hummed, holding the gun close to my chest. “Suppose you’re outta luck today, stranga’. Come back when you’ve got the cash.”

“Wait–!”

The higher voice stopped us both, drawing our attention to the blonde girl. “Being short by two isn’t much... Are you sure you c-can’t make an exception?”

“No dice,” I said.

Her lips parted to fight back, but I interrupted her. “I run a business, and a business needs its money. Even two spinels are invaluable. If you want your Matilda, you’re gonna hav’ta pay up.”

"But–!"

"Ashley, that's enough." The man scolded, putting out a hand to soothe her. "It's not worth the trouble. I can get it later."

"What if it's too late then?"

"I'll make sure that doesn't happen."

She whipped her head back to me, growing annoyance clear in her tone. "H-Hey–! What do *you* know about the Matilda anyways? Charging so much for something you probably can't use!"

I heard the man *bark* her name, the duo starting to argue as I dwelled on her words. Can't... use? She had *no idea* what she was getting herself into. Even compared to that *brute* of a protector, I could *certainly* use that weapon quite well. *Can't use*... Pfft, I doubt even the *blonde* could use this weapon.

Their bickering interrupted my thoughts as their argument grew and grew. Before they could start screaming, I shouted, "STRANGA'S!"

They snapped their mouths shut at the interruption, abruptly turning their heads in my direction.

"Listen. To stop ya' fussin', I can offa' ya' a deal."

"What kind of deal?" asked the woman.

I shifted my eyes over to the man. If I were to throw this idea on the table, *both* parties had to be on board. His signature scowl was still present, furrowing further as he stared in thought. His sigh signed my deal before he spoke.

"What is it?"

"Cheer up, Leon! This is gonna get you that gun!! Plus, I know you're a good shot."

I shot Ashley a quick glare. "This was *your* idea."

She giggled. "Well, this was *technically* that merchant's idea."

"That you instigated."

Ashley looked around sheepishly, picking at her skirt as she sat on a nearby barrel. I didn't bother to watch, instead adjusting the straps on my chest. This, beyond everything, was *embarrassing*. As an agent, my mission was to bring Ashley home, away from this hell-hole village (now turned castle for some reason), and back to America. Yet, here we were in a shockingly well-put-together shooting range. Our deal with the merchant was simple: if I could score more targets than the merchant in under two minutes, he would waver the two spinels off the Matilda's price. After fixing my attire, I looked at a wide counter in front of me, separating us from the oddly pirate-themed shooting range. Among several clips of ammo was a single gun, fitted with a stock. ...A gun I sorely missed. The Matilda.

It felt odd to be walking up to the small weapon again, holding it in my hands. Most of the gun's size was in its stock, but its heft originated from the metal. It shone a dirty silver against the room's golden lights, highlighting scratches that marred a nostalgic design with poisoned memories. It had been several years since the last time I wielded the Matilda, a time I wished I could forget. However, it had granted me my agent status, so I had to give the small machine its respect.

I stretched my arms, trying to accustom myself to the gun once more. Its long stock pressed against my right shoulder as I brought the small aim notch into view. It even *felt* like the gun I had back in Raccoon City, my fingers quickly adjusting to its shapes as if I had never left.

...Maybe this silly competition wouldn't be the worst thing.

Loud taps against a mic blasted through damaged speakers, causing both Ashley and I to flinch. Then, to my disdain, the merchant's voice followed. To control the shooting range, the robed man had to operate it someplace else, and frankly, I'd rather not have his eyes over my shoulder.

"Alriiight stranga'! Enough waiting, it's about time you show us your skills, ey'?"

Ashley cheered as I let out an irritated huff. "Yeah!! C'mon Leon, you can do this!!"

Gripping the Matilda tighter in my hands, I pointed the gun at the shooting range. "No guarantees."

The merchant's voice resumed from over the gritty speakers, *"Hit all the pirates that spring up, and make sure to avoid those sailors! There are twenty pirates to hit, stranga'.*

"Ready your weapons!"

I turned my focus dead ahead.

"Three! Two! One!"

Let's get this Matilda.

"GO!"

Spring. Spring. Cardboard-cutout pirates. Real funny. *BANG-BANG-BANG.*

Even after years of navigating all sorts of weapons, the feeling of the burst-shot Matilda welcomed itself into my hands.

Spring spring spring. BANG-BANG-BANG. BANG-BANG-BANG.

"Aah, my mother could shoot betta'!"

The merchant was *not* helping.

Spring-spring-spring-spring-spring. Shit, they're getting a bit harder. Need to make sure those fake sailors aren't hit. *BANG-BANG-BANG. BANG-BANG-BANG.*

With a graceful *SPRING*, over ten pirates flew up at once. *Shit.*

BANG-BANG-BANG. BANG-BANG-BANG. BANG-BANG– Fuck, missed two. How was I supposed to get all those at once?

"It's O-OK! You've still got this!!" Ashley shouted from the sidelines.

She wasn't helping either.

Eyes still peeled, I watched as the range went oddly quiet. One second.... two seconds...

Spring-spring.

BANG-BANG-BANG.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I had just *barely* missed the last sailor cutout and hit the final pirate.

"Aaand TIME!"

The Matilda found its home back on the counter amidst the gleeful noises from my escortee. "LEON!! You hit almost every single one!!"

"Almost meaning eighteen," I grumbled in response. "There were twenty."

"Well, I know *I* couldn't hit twenty targets if I tried."

I shot a look behind me. "Exactly. You're not getting near any gun here."

Her small smile flowered into a beam. I looked away, returning to the gun to give it the courtesy of a reload. We soon heard small thumps far behind us, a familiar hooded figure descending the staircase.

He spoke with a thinned chuckle. "Alright, you had your fun, stranga'."

I reluctantly shuffled to the side, watching his muddled silhouette approach the Matilda. He reached out, picking it up and tracing his fingerless-gloved hands across the surface. A shuffle here and an awkward stretch there lead to the merchant groaning in irritation from under his heavy layers. He set down the gun, stepping back to let his hands go slack. His dirtied digits reached for the straps of his disaster of a backpack and set it down in an undisturbed corner. With no wait, the merchant popped off the buttons holding his coat together. It wasn't something new, as I watched him reveal his trinkets behind heavy clothes each time we met, but...

After the final button popped off, he slacked his shoulders, shedding his heavy cloak.

The large piece of clothing gave way to a hooded long-sleeved undershirt that hugged close to his skin with each move he made. Satchels, bags, belts, and garments still hung from his chest, obscuring the rest of his outfit, but *luckily for both of us*, his covered arms were on full display. He was... uh... *toned*. Sleeves outlined each curve in his triceps, stretching with each move the man made. Deltoids moved carefully against his shoulders, leading to the obscured back muscles. As he moved to unbuckle his satchels, the muscles on his forearm twisted to the tendons in his working hands. Hell, I could see *divots* in his skin, outlining scars he had adorned throughout his years.

I was shaken out of my reverie when he snapped his fingers in front of me, having removed his gear when I was... otherwise occupied.

"Stranga'!!"

I blinked my eyes back to focus, looking at the merchant's still-masked face.

"Are you ready?"

He held the Matilda already in his hands, leaning against the counter. *Damnit*, even just having his hand against the table, his biceps still poked through the tight shirt.

"...Yes."

The seller chuckled. "Alright, you betta' be ready."

He turned away, snuggling the gun against his shoulder as I had

earlier. Facing the range ahead, he aimed his gun, dialed in on the task at hand. I found myself leaning against the barrel Ashley sat on, both of us intimately aware of the tensed forearms in our view.

The merchant pressed his foot underneath a nook in the counter, flipping up a small pedal. He stepped down on it, starting the game manually.

Spring. Sprin–BANG-BANG-BANG.

Oh.

Spring spring s–BANG-BANG-BANG.

Oh.

Spring-sprin–BANG-BANG–Spring-sprinBANG–Spring-BANG-BANG-BANG.

I wasn't winning this.

A loud *SPRING* rung out as the collection of nearly ten cutouts from earlier rose. There was *no way* he could get all these.

BANG-BANG-BANG.

Apparently, I couldn't see the *small* dynamite that a center pirate was holding the first time. Because, with the *craziest* precision I had witnessed in *years*, I watched the merchant hit the dynamite with his first bullet. *Every single* cutout flipped down together with a crunched explosion noise.

I already knew that I had lost, but it didn't help when the merchant started to *reload*. A confident hand gripped the clip, *dropping* it to the ground to leave several bullets to roll across the floor. That same

hand picked up a clip from the counter, pushing it back into place with a *click*. And *dammit*, if I said I wasn't watching those biceps working in tandem with his work, I'd be lying.

He focused the Matilda at the shooting range once more before turning his head toward us, keeping shadowed eye contact as–*Spring-sp–BANG-BANG-BANG*.

The last target, hit *perfectly*.

To say that we were stunned was an understatement. The now-crowned champion set down his gun, dusting his hands off. Just *watching* him casually recuperate after a flawless victory was maddening. He draped robes he had discarded back onto his body, hiding the robust figure underneath.

By the time his wardrobe was back on his person, he looked over, seeing our still bodies. His chuckle was muffled by his mask.
"What, surprised?"

A prick of anger gnawed at me as I responded curtly, "...I didn't know about the dynamite."

"Well, it *is* a bit hard to spot the first time. Tough luck, stranga'."

"N-Now, *wait!!*"

Another sigh left me as Ashley started to fight again. "That wasn't fair! There's *no way* Leon could get that first try!!"

"The deal was if ya' friend could score betta' than me in one round, not two."

"B-But–!"

The fight devolved into white noise as I watched Ashley insist on a rematch while the merchant repeatedly declined. It was indeed unfair, but the deal *was* set. I couldn't do much about the agreed deal, but...

A rematch... would require the seller to shoot again.

As I watched Ashley continue to fight, I saw the merchant retort, moving his arms around under his layers.

...The aim this time was to ask him about his work-out routine. Obviously.

Nothing else.

Whatever Lingers On

Written By HopeStoryteller

Unlike her uncouth, undesired, and unexceptional siblings, Lady Alcina Dimitrescu is a busy woman. She keeps herself occupied when Mother Miranda doesn't require her particular expertise, and as of late, Mother Miranda hasn't requested her for much.

This doesn't bother Alcina. She knows well that, out of her 'siblings', she is by far the most useful to their mother. Donna provides her dolls, Moreau... is himself. Nothing either of them are capable of with their Cadou parasite is of any particular note to Mother Miranda, save in the pursuit of knowledge, and Alcina is of far more aid with that. Heisenberg's powers *could* be as useful as Alcina's, if he cared to do anything worthwhile with them. Instead, he spends all his time tinkering away in his factory, and for some unfathomable reason, Mother Miranda still has a soft spot for that irreverent whelp.

Alcina, however, is useful. *Alcina* has a head for numbers, for understanding delicate truths that few can handle. So it is that Alcina is Mother Miranda's most frequently sought-out assistant when it comes to carrying out her own experiments, and so it is that she is occasionally even trusted to perform experiments of her own. No one else is, not even *Heisenberg*, and in that, Alcina can be assured that Mother Miranda knows her worth.

One such experiment granted Alcina her own beloved daughters. Another occupies her attention presently; while Mother Miranda suspects that this particular villager will be nothing special even after being implanted with Cadou, he claimed descent from one of

#resident evil village

the Four Kings, and consequently, the possibility remains that something will happen.

Thus, Alcina has been tasked to observe; to determine if this wretched manthing will transform into a Lycan like so many others have already. It hardly matters to Alcina what the outcome is, yet nevertheless, observe she shall in the depths of her castle's dungeons until something *does* happen

Something does indeed happen, sooner rather than later, though not with the Cadou or the manthing.

Instead, the door to the dungeons opens, creaking loudly as it does. There is a sharp intake of breath, from someone who is decidedly not Mother Miranda, and given that any of Castle Dimitrescu's staff *should* know better than to disturb her down here, there are precisely three individuals that this could be.

"...Mother? I do not mean to interrupt, but..."

That quiet uncertainty narrows the possibilities down to her eldest.

"Good morning, Bela," Alcina says without looking at her. "Is everything alright?"

"Er, yes," Bela says. "There is simply... well, that is to say... is this a bad time, Mother?"

"I am afraid so."

"Oh..."

Alcina eyes the body somewhat derisively–how *dare* this disgusting manthing prevent her from properly addressing the concerns of her daughters! It does nothing in response, or at all. She cannot allow

her attention to fully leave it. She cannot address Bela's concerns plainly.

"We may speak when I am done here," Alcina says at last, "assuming that this is not an urgent matter. Is it?"

There is no answer. Alcina chances a look behind her and finds that Bela has already departed, considerably more silently than she had arrived. She only does that when there *is* something the matter, and so Alcina resolves to seek her out as soon as she is done here.

In the meantime–

The body stirs. Alcina leans forward, watching as it twists and writhes in a manner she has seen many times before.

Mother Miranda will be disappointed, though no more surprised than Alcina is, to find that this manthing has become a Lycan like so many others.

"Disappointing," Mother Miranda says, surveying the now fully-transformed Lycan from the outside of its cell as it gnaws ineffectually at the bars.

"Quite," Alcina agrees.

"Not altogether surprising," Mother continues. "He was not originally from this village, as you were already informed, nor was he truly descended from one of those ancient bloodlines. He was under the mistaken impression that a lie would protect him."

"No more than the level of foolishness that I would expect from the average mediocre manthing," Alcina agrees, as the door leading out of the dungeons opens once more.

Alcina looks. Mother Miranda does not, though Alcina is certain she knows nonetheless that it is none other than Cassandra Dimitrescu standing there.

"Good morning, Mother Miranda," Cassandra says, curtsying deeply as she does.

Mother Miranda acknowledges Cassandra with nothing more than a nod.

"Good morning, Mother!"

"Good morning, Cassandra," Alcina says with a warm smile. "How are you?"

"Quite well, thank you! Though, Mother, if you have a moment–"

Mother Miranda clears her throat, without looking at either of them.

"I'm afraid that I don't," Alcina says, taking the hint.

"...Later," Cassandra says. "If you have the time *later*, there is something I would very much like for you to see!"

"Yes, of course," Alcina promises. "I must assist Mother Miranda."

"I hope that goes well."

Her middle daughter vanishes in a swarm of dark flies. Alcina watches her go. Mother Miranda doesn't, at least not visibly, but to be perfectly honest, Alcina has suspected that Mother Miranda does not need to be looking at things to see them for some time now.

"I apologize for my daughter's conduct, Mother," Alcina says briskly, turning back to her. "She is... all of my daughters are... *sheltered*, in both a literal sense and a figurative one."

"Hm," Mother Miranda says, and that's all the acknowledgment Cassandra gets. "Perhaps we should turn this Lycan loose... it is *rare* that the villagers recognize such a beast after they have been implanted with the Cadou, but should they do so, it will serve as a warning."

Alcina nods. "I could not agree more."

The residents of this village are wary of her at best, and none of them are particularly subtle about their attitudes towards House Dimitrescu as a whole. A wealthy woman who has lived within this castle for as long as any of them can remember, alongside her three reclusive daughters and without any sort of husband in the picture, is bound to turn some heads no matter where in the world it occurs.

In truth, Alcina has not even lived in this village for a particularly long time–though she is, of course, functionally immortal. She will outlive every one of these villagers. This has not bothered her since shortly after the Cadou was bestowed upon her. Before it occurred to her what a gift the Cadou was, she was more concerned with everything Mother Miranda had taken from her.

She knows better now.

(Now, she scarcely recalls the faces of those select few she cared about before coming to the village, never mind their names. It's better this way.)

The residents of the village are wary of her, as they very well should be, and Alcina takes great pains to remind them of that fact whenever any of them happen to grow particularly uppity–for a certain value of *uppity*. Nevertheless, as much as Alcina would prefer to interact with nothing of the outside world save Mother Miranda and perhaps that Duke, House Dimitrescu is not self-

sufficient nor anything approaching it, and so Alcina often finds herself requiring money.

As a direct consequence, House Dimitrescu produces some of the finest wines in the world. Much of it–almost all of it–the Duke is willing to buy for a fair enough price.

Almost all, however, does not mean *all*. She retains a few bottles of any given vintage regardless of its quality.

The particular villager before her wouldn't know good wine if she broke a bottle of it open over her head–today, her wine is here for intimidation. She's well aware of the rumors, not entirely unfounded, that her wine contains a significant proportion of human blood. The rumors are typically enough to ward off company.

"Lady Dimitrescu," says this villager, "I sincerely do apologize for bothering you, but if you know anything at all about my sister's disappearance... some information, or even closure, would be vastly appreciated."

This particular villager, who had introduced herself as something Alcina has since already forgotten, is severely lacking in common sense. It is *incredibly foolish*, to put it lightly, to even come close to confronting Lady Dimitrescu over her actions.

She's almost impressed.

"Your... sister, wasn't it?" Alcina says dryly.

The young woman nods vigorously. "Yes. I thought that perhaps... well, she worked for you as a maid, and she always spoke highly of you and of your daughters– I'd imagine that you would also be beside yourself with worry if anything happened to them, so if anyone would understand..."

...For a moment, Alcina entertains the possibility of what she might do if her daughters happened to vanish. Depending on the time of year, it might be utterly impossible. Apart from that, however, she would be far more concerned about how likely her daughters would be to give away the fact that they were... *not exactly human*... than for their actual well-being.

They are, in many ways, precisely as untouchable by time as Alcina herself is. It all works out perfectly, all according to Mother Miranda's plans.

"I would be," Alcina agrees. "However, I'm afraid that–"

The door opens behind the villager, revealing none other than Daniela. "Mother!"

Alcina sighs. "Good afternoon, Daniela–what is it?"

"My sisters and I were speaking with each other earlier today," Daniela says. Her gaze flicks to the villager. "There was... did you have business with our mother?"

"Er," the villager says timidly. *Is she actually more afraid of Daniela?* Alcina is almost amused.

"If you'll give us just a moment to conclude it," Alcina says.

"Of course!" Daniela nods vigorously. "I'll wait, Mother."

She steps back out, shutting the door behind her. Alcina considers her options–whatever it is that her daughters have been conversing about this morning, it is rare that all three of them are united in more trivial requests.

"I know nothing of your sister's fate," Alcina says at last.

"Oh..."

"However," she adds, significantly more truthfully, "if she *has* disappeared, I would make peace with that. It is very unlikely that you will ever see her again. Now, go home."

The village girl nods and curtsies. "I will do that. Thank you for your counsel, Lady Dimitrescu!"

She leaves. Alcina watches her go. How lucky she is, that Alcina is too busy today to make *her* disappear as well.

The low–not to mention *loud*–buzzing that fills Alcina's ears as she enters means Daniela is joined by at least one of her sisters, though she wouldn't be able to guess whether that is Cassandra or Bela.

She opens the door to all three.

“Good afternoon, Mother,” Cassandra says brightly.

“Good afternoon, girls,” Alcina replies. "Might I inquire as to what, precisely, is the matter?"

The girls exchange glances.

"Well," Bela begins. "Daniela has developed a significant interest in music as of late, both creating it herself and listening to that of others."

"I am aware." Daniela has certainly improved since she hauled the old piano out of storage, to the point where Alcina no longer needs to vacate the premises to avoid constant missed notes and accidentally played tritones.

"According to the Duke, they don't *use* record players in the outside world anymore," Cassandra cuts in.

That does come as a surprise. "Then what in Miranda's name do they use instead?"

"Dee-vee-dees!" Daniela exclaims. "Which, as it turns out, look like much smaller records, yet can't be played on a record player."

"The Duke was willing to include a player for them with some of his deeveedees," Bela explains. "We– well, largely Daniela– have actually been acquiring these from him for some time now, but it never was anything worth being brought to your attention, Mother."

"Until!" Cassandra produces a small, slim case from somewhere within her robes. "Mother, you simply must see this!"

Alcina takes it without looking at it. "Girls, I don't understand why–"

"*Look*," Daniela insists.

She looks. She finds a familiar face staring back at her from underneath an even larger hat than hers. That face is surrounded by four men in dark suits holding instruments. She can identify each one without seeing their faces; she recalls when that photograph was taken.

MISS D AND THE PALLBOYS, the case reads in English. It has been decades since she last heard that name.

"Mother?" Bela asks. "Are you alright?"

"Perfectly so." Alcina hopes that they can't tell she's lying. She doesn't believe that they can read English. "Why did you bring this to my attention?"

The girls exchange glances before–at last–Cassandra blurts out, "She looks like you. Is she a relative?"

Ah.

At this point, Alcina might as well tell them the truth.

"She... was me." Alcina sits. "Many years ago. Before Mother Miranda offered me her gift."

"I *knew* it!" Daniela crows. "Cassandra didn't think that it could be you, Bela didn't want to assume anything either way– but I *knew* it, Mother, I *did*!"

"What happened to the... men, upon that cover?" Bela asks. "Did you–"

"I don't know," Alcina says.

It's the truth: she doesn't. She hadn't meant to be away for long; then everything changed. The others couldn't have continued the band without her.

Yet *someone* must have made this deeveedee. The Duke sells, whatever it is the buyer wants within reason. He does not (typically) *make*. Was it one of her old bandmates? Their descendants?

...*Could* any of them still be alive, today? It doesn't matter, ultimately. She has no way of finding out.

"They... were not altogether objectionable," Alcina murmurs. "For manthings."

Cassandra nods. "So, that *was* you singing, then?"

"Yes, but–"

"You have a very pretty voice," Daniela says intently.

"Possibly–"

"Daniela has been begging all of us to join her in our own sort of 'band' since she learned what that was," Bela says.

"Could you sing for us?" Daniela asks. "Please?"

"I... don't know," Alcina says, and she means it. "I haven't for a very long time..."

"...Please? Mother, I will never ask you for anything ever again!"

That is a blatant lie if she's ever heard one, but Alcina is far too distracted to point that out. What she would rather not admit is that she doesn't know if her singing voice survived the Cadou implantation. She hasn't *tried* to sing in a very long time; she isn't certain she could bear the disappointment.

"I will consider it," Alcina says, and that is that. She is *Lady Alcina Dimitrescu*, one of Mother Miranda's Four Lords and indisputably the most important of them all. She should not be cowed by anything, never mind something so small as this.

So she *will* try. If she is to be disappointed, better to be disappointed and move on.

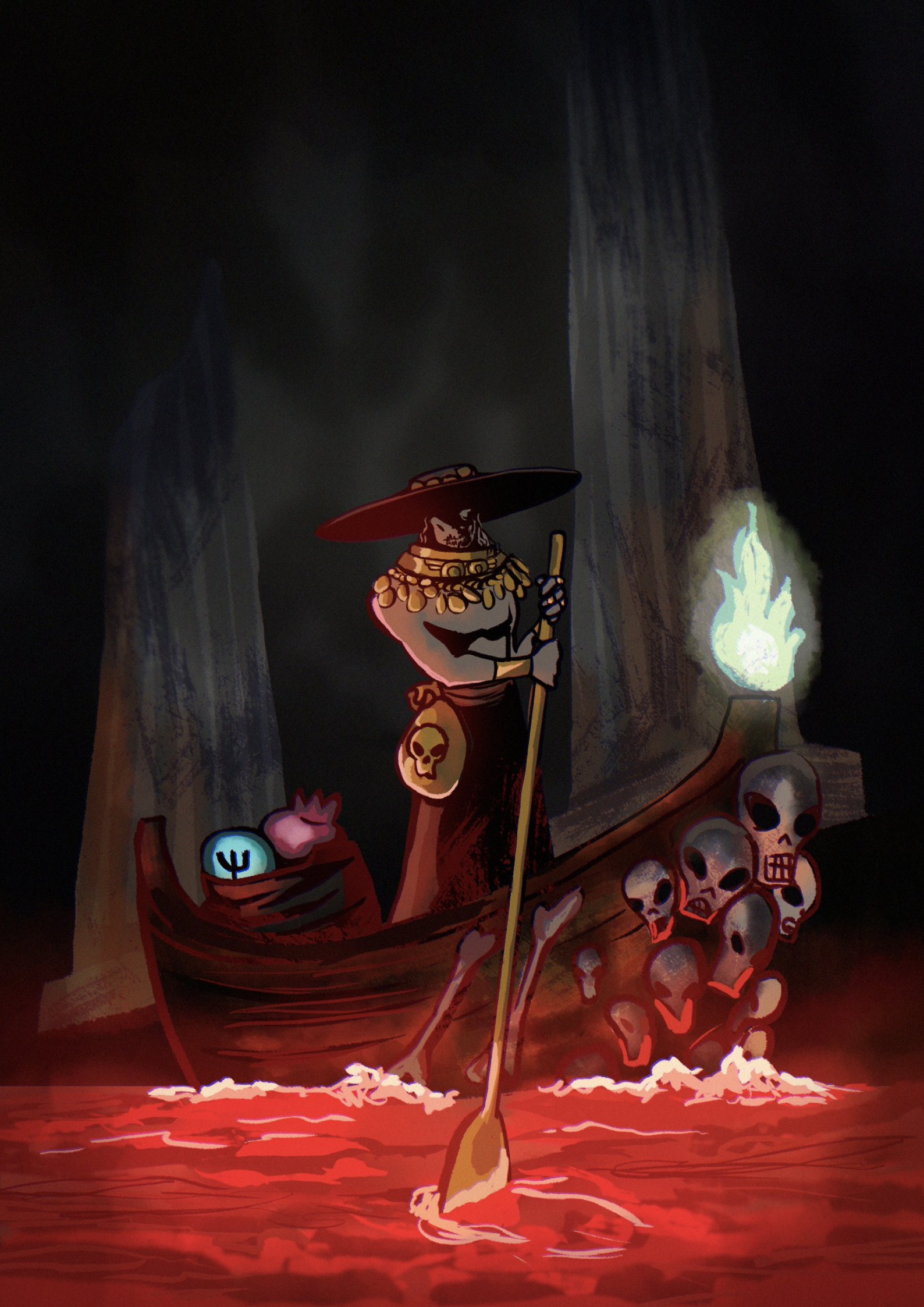
A few days later, another of the Four Lords creeps unseen into the dungeons of Castle Dimitrescu, humming an old tune under his breath. As far as he's concerned, that *bitch* Miranda keeps them all on a tight leash, and none more so than the lady of the castle– but Dimitrescu herself can't complain about him if she can't prove he's screwing around. Today, the plan is to bend the locks on the

dungeon cells, just enough so the next time that super-sized bitch tries to lock some hapless villager in, she'll be in for a nasty surprise. Tomorrow, who knows?

He pauses near the doorway up to the rest of the castle.

Is that *singing*?

Heisenberg doesn't want to know, actually, and so he leaves as quickly and as quietly as he'd come.

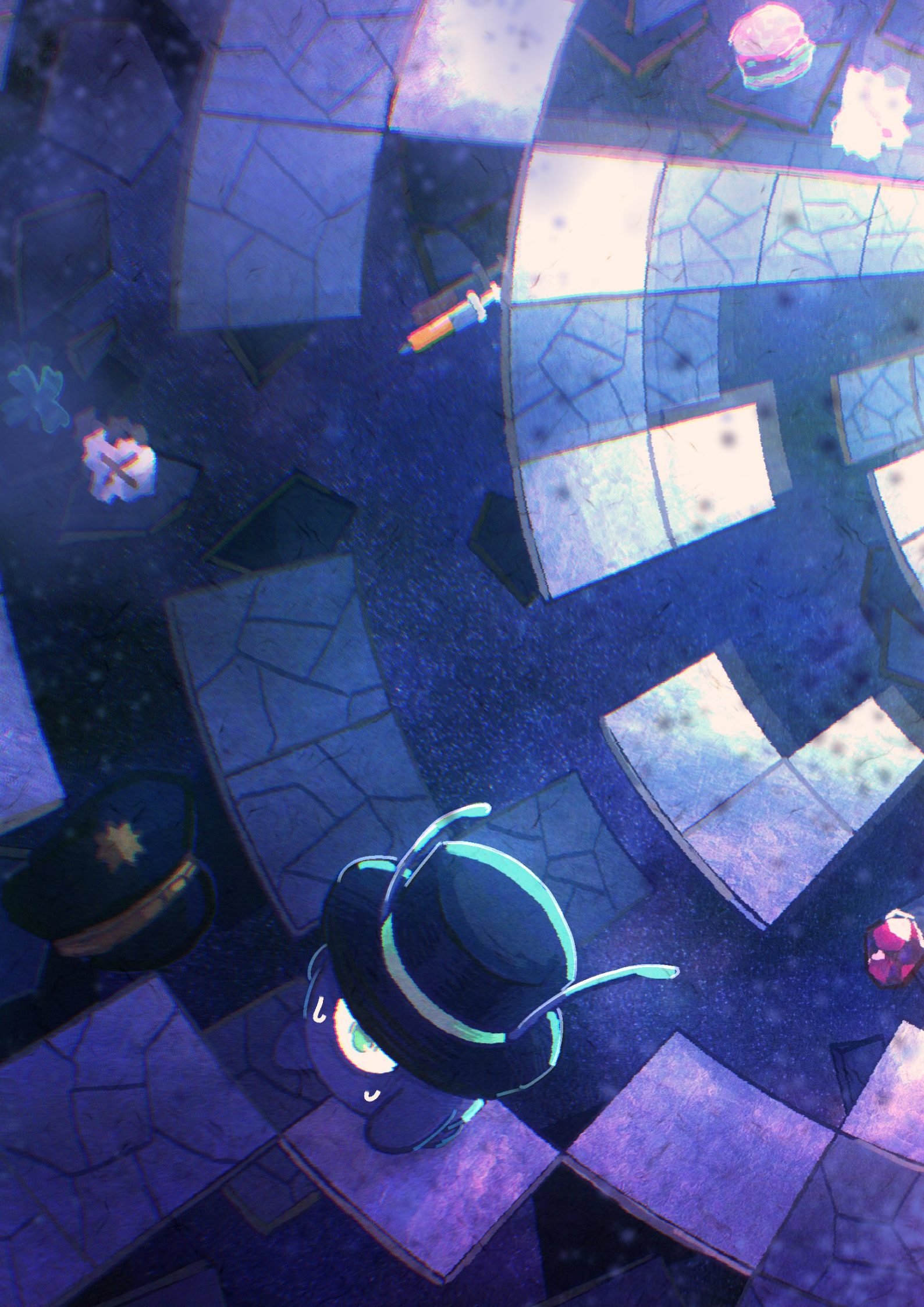


" Oh, Stanley. Must you insist on ruining my story ? "
The Stanley Parable

VICTORY!

GRUMPY SNACKPOD
42.000 / BAGWORM
GRUMPUS
LESSER COCOMITE
CAPPUCCEETLE
CHOCOLANT
PIELOBITE
MILLIMOCHI
MINIMAKI
PALETOSS GRANDE

2500PTS
MIAMI
VINEGAR CLOWN



Peppino PIZZA

VS

PIZZA TOWER

E2·07'23

A Victim Of Magic

Written By MxSoda

It seemed to be a regular day within the Cookie Kingdom.

The area's local Coffee Magician and chronic insomniac Espresso Cookie was walking back from the Vanilla Kingdom- a bag full of various ingredients and equipment in his arms. His plans for the day ahead were simple. Restock his shelves, test the new equipment, do an hour or so of studying, and then test the equipment until the brink of dawn. No distractions, no disturbances. Just pure focus. It sounded like complete bliss.

For now, though, he could only dream of that perfect life. Instead, he was staggering through the nearby woods- his annoyance of a companion Madeline Cookie walking beside him, talking about god knows what. Espresso had learned to let out the occasional interested "hmm" and "that's interesting" to keep the other blissfully unaware of their rapidly growing disinterest.

"Haha! Perhaps at some point, *I* will be able to visit the great Fire Spirit Cookie and ask for his grand advice!" Madeline shouted, his eyes brimming with wonder. "Maybe we shall have the chance to spar? That would be truly marvelous!"

"Hm. I hope you get what you wish for." Espresso replied, completely nonchalant about the whole idea.

"Oh, come on, my companion! Surely you can't be at least a bit excited about such a wonderful opportunity?" Madeline asked,

throwing an arm around the other cookie. Espresso quickly shoved the other off, scrambling to his workshop door.

"I am much too busy to involve myself in such tedious affairs. Now, if you excuse me, I shall be hiding away for the foreseeable future. Have fun with whatever absurd sparring match you're planning, Madeline. Good day, now."

And before the other cookie could argue otherwise, Espresso slammed the door, sighing as his ears filled with peace and quiet. In an instant, the cogs turned in his head. Plans flooded him from near and far. There was no time for hesitation, for error, for impression. All he needed to do now was sit down, flick through his papers, and...

"Aha! So you're the individual behind these mechanisms? Interesting, interesting... greetings."

A voice.

A voice he did not recognize.

Inside Espresso's own home.

He slowly looked up, locking eyes with the source of the voice. A particularly tall individual, with long golden hair, kitted out in steampunk-esc gear. A long golden key rested against the wall nearby, which seemed to belong to them. The other cookie began to look Espresso up and down, strutting towards them with a curious, almost predatory gaze.

"Hm... you do not appear to be the cause of an anomaly or a time

rift. How boring. But at least your home is spacious. I'm sure I shall get lots of work done in a place like this."

The long-haired cookie held out their hand, a manic smile crossing their face.

"Greetings, my name is Timekeeper Cookie. Chronokinesis extraordinaire. Master of-"

"No, no. I'm sorry. I don't understand where you got this assumption from, but you are very much not welcome here." Espresso grumbled, shooing away the other's hand. "If you would mind disappearing to wherever you emerged from, I'd be most grateful."

"Hm? Well, your precious long-haired protector seemed to paint the image that you'd be eager to lodge me while me and my... acquaintances take residency here."

"Precious... long-haired protector?" Espresso sighed. "Are you talking about Madeline Cookie, perhaps?"

"Ah, no. That wasn't his name. 'Something Vanilla Cookie?' I believe?

The name caused Espresso's blood to run cold. *Pure* Vanilla Cookie? Allowed someone to disturb *his* work?

"Right, come with me," Espresso instructed, eyes narrow. "We are going to Pure Vanilla's garden to get me out of this mess. I'm not entertaining your presence any longer."

"That is... quite harsh." The other cookie replied, barely sounding offended. "If you want to save the hassle, I can just whisk us back there in minutes. I assure you."

“And what in the Ancients’ name is your strategy?”

“Ohhoho...” Timekeeper muttered, picking up their scissors and whisking them above their heads. “Just you wait... the means will come together soon enough...”

And with that, a massive brown and gold portal tore open- bathing the room in a vibrant orange light. Espresso immediately screwed their eyes shut- desperately trying not to look too hard at the situation he was in.

“Now... Espresso Cookie. Do you trust me?”

“Hah! Not at all, you maniac!”

“Correct answer,” Timekeeper muttered, giving their companion a gentle shove. They jumped in behind him, and the pair landed right in front of the Vanilla Castle’s gates. Espresso's eyes were still firmly shut upon landing but slowly began to open in a mix of terror and wonder.

“I... huh,” Espresso muttered, looking around at the pale yellow flowers and delicate wafer walls. “It... actually worked. We’re here.”

“I’ve been working with Time for the last millennium, and you were *doubting* that I’d manage to get you to our location in one piece?” Timekeeper asked, a look of annoyance on their face. “You aren’t exactly a trusting one, are you...?”

“Well, never mind that.” Espresso huffed, approaching the Vanilla Guardian’s usual meditation spot. “Because, now it’s time for me to get you and your disorderly conduct out of my house for good! Sir Pure Vanilla Cookie? I require an audience with you.”

Pure Vanilla Cookie, hearing his name called, swung his head around and put on his usual gentle smile.

"Ah, Espresso Cookie. Oh, and Timekeeper Cookie! Our most esteemed guest!" The Elder Cookie greeted, giving a polite bow. "I trust that our friend Espresso Cookie is giving you the treatment truly deserving of a Legendary Hero..."

Espresso immediately froze in his tracks. What did that buffoon Madeline say earlier? Something about a group of Legendary Heroes taking temporary residence in the kingdom? And, this time-shifting hooligan was one of them?"

"W-why, yes, Sir Pure Vanilla Cookie!" Espresso cut in, his face growing more and more nervous by the second. As much as he despised having guests invade his sacred working space, he didn't have the time or the mental willpower to be lectured by Pure Vanilla for letting the kingdom down at such a vital moment. "I... assure you that Mx Timekeeper Cookie over here is only getting the finest treatment within my humble abode!"

Timekeeper blinked their swirly eyes a couple of times but seemed otherwise unfazed by the interruption, shrugging their shoulders. Pure Vanilla simply smiled and nodded at the pair.
"That's what I like to hear. I trust that you'll continue giving Timekeeper Cookie the respect they deserve." Pure Vanilla replied, before slightly tilting his head. "So, why did the two of you wish to see me? Is there anything I can help you with?"

"W-we just wanted to see if our... esteemed guest here had any extra... luggage to collect..." The Coffee Magician blurted out, clearly pulling at straws to find a solution. But to his surprise, Pure Vanilla nodded.

“In a way, they actually do! Just a second, please...”

Pure Vanilla disappeared for a few minutes, returning with a small marble-like cog object in his hands. “Mx Timekeeper Cookie, I believe your pet ended up getting quite interested in Miss Latte Cookie’s brewing process. I’ve been looking after them for the last few hours. I’m sorry if you got paranoid over their disappearance!”

“Why, thank you, Sir Pure Vanilla Cookie,” Timekeeper replied, nodding. “I assure you that Continuum Cog would’ve found its way back to me in due time, but I appreciate your kindness in looking after it.”

“The pleasure’s all mine.” Pure Vanilla smiled, looking between the pair. “Now... is there anything else I’m able to do for you two?”

“No- that should suffice,” Espresso replied, sighing. “Thank you for your help, Sir.”

“No problem! Should either of you require assistance during Mx Timekeeper Cookie’s stay, please do not hesitate to find me.”

“We shall,” Timekeeper replied, waving their scissors and summoning another time rift. “Good day to you, Sir Pure Vanilla.”

And with that, Timekeeper took Espresso’s hand and whisked them back through the rift and into Espresso’s home with a smirk.

“So, that’s that. It looks like this is where I shall be staying for the next week or two. I have your word.” They replied smugly. “I thank you for your kindness, Espresso Cookie.”

Espresso let out a loud, disappointed sigh, turning on his heel. "I'm going to my workshop. Where I expect to *not* be disturbed under any circumstances. Good day, Mx Timekeeper. And, the same to your cog."

"Now, hang on just a second," Timekeeper cut in. "You don't have to treat this arrangement as a disturbance to your work if you're brave enough."
They delved into one of their bags and produced a small bottle of golden liquid, holding it in front of his face.
"Let me work by your side, just for today. And, I assure you, I'll make it worth your while."

"And just *how* do you plan on that, you mechanical maniac?"

"You give the impression of someone who's quite work-driven," Timekeeper stated, sitting down at the nearby desk. "Someone whose entertainment comes from chaining themself to their workstation for hours at a time- with little regard for resting. Am I incorrect?"

Espresso seemed a little startled by the other's bluntness but awkwardly nodded, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Why, yes. Sleep is seldom on my schedule." He replied, tilting his head. "What's your point?"

"With just a drop of the liquid in this very bottle, I just *might* have a way to help you make a cup of coffee that'll last forever..." Timekeeper hummed, putting their hands behind their back. "Something that'll be like paradise for a workaholic like yourself..."

Espresso thought for a second. As annoying as it was, the other's proposal sounded almost perfect. An everlasting cup of coffee... one

that would improve his productivity at least ten times over. But, to end up with this heavenly contraption, he'd have to trust the stranger invading his most precious area. He took a few more seconds to think before letting out another loud sigh.

"Fine," Espresso replied, crossing his arms. "But I'm expecting an infinite cup of coffee by dusk."

Timekeeper cackled at the other's words, grabbing their scissors, the potion, and a cup of still-warm coffee from Espresso's desk.

"By dusk? Oh, my friend. You underestimate me. Just watch..."

Timekeeper waved their scissors above their head before disappearing, leaving Espresso and Continuum Cog to sit in wait.

"Well, if your owner's just going to abandon us for the time being, I'm going down to the office. I trust that you're self-sufficient, Cog?"

Continuum Cog blinked before going off to a nearby chair and hovering patiently, still blinking occasionally.

"Hm. You are. Well, good on you, Cog." Espresso replied. "Now-"

Before Espresso had time to finish his sentence, the room filled with another golden flash. Timekeeper tapped their boot, alerting the other to their return before handing the cup over.

"I told you to wait," Timekeeper said, winking and handing the cup over to Espresso. "Go on. Have a taste."

"I... what in the..."

"I told you. The power of time, my friend." Timekeeper clarified. "Just... take the coffee."

Espresso thought to ask another question but quickly realized he'd likely just end up going in circles. He snatched the cup from the other's hands and took a large sip- seeming surprised.

"This... actually tastes sublime," Espresso muttered, eyes widening. "I... I'm impressed. Very, very impressed."

"See! I believe this arrangement could work out just fine." Timekeeper replied. "Look at the cup. What do you see?"

Espresso peered into the cup. Sure enough, the cup has refilled itself- making it appear full once more.

"Y-you..."

"Hmmm... I think I've won this round. So, what do you say? Will you allow your 'esteemed guest' to stick around for a little longer...?

"I... oh Ancients Above, *fine*. You can stay." Espresso replied, rolling their eyes.

"But... any work you perform here is stuff that won't cause a time rip within my own house.."

"I can make absolutely *no* promises." Timekeeper laughed, throwing their arms behind their head. "Oh, we're going to do some fantastic work together, my friend."

"Do not call me friend."

"Once again, no promises... buddy."

“Once again, no promises… buddy.”

Espresso sighed. Timekeeper *laughed*. Nothing much had really changed during this whole encounter. Espresso was still crabby and withdrawn. Timekeeper was still clinically insane.

Yet… a tiny cell at the back of Espresso’s mind couldn’t help but wonder what their fortnight together would shape up to be. What inventions would come out of the pair’s minds. But, there was one thing that the young cookie knew for sure.

It sure as hell wouldn’t be boring.

CHESED

Written By Nami

It's not the first time Larry's lost a gym battle, oh no. It's far from it, and as he watches his Staraptor fall to the ground, defeated, he lets out a deep, tired sigh.

"Good job," he says. "I didn't stand a chance." Perhaps it's rude to say so, but he can usually tell right away when he does or doesn't. There's a clear-as-day difference between a trainer who knows what they're doing and a trainer that came to challenge him because he's Larry, and the latter are often in for a nasty surprise. He's well-known for reacting the same way no matter the outcome of the battle: a placid look on his face, a flat congratulations. There's another ritual there, too, although it's a little less common. He's going to partake in it right now, however.

"...Think I went a little too hard in that battle," he mumbles, stretching his arms up and behind his head. His back cracks, and he grunts. "Worked up an appetite."

He pauses, stretches a little more. And here comes the ritual, after every battle, win or lose: "If you want to join, I'll treat you."

The young trainer looks back at him, bright eyes just a tad confused. They're certainly on the younger side, he reckons–maybe not as young as spry little Nemona or her quiet friend, but young enough for Larry to inwardly raise a brow... inwardly let out a little smile. They're taking a moment to reply–a moment long enough for him to notice. It's always charming, having kids like this roll through the gym.

#pokémon

They speak up eventually. "Oh, um... sure! I'd love to, actually. If that's okay." The response is paired with a nervous nod, quickly morphing into a grateful bow. He wonders if he comes off as intimidating to them, but of course, he doesn't think too hard about it. All he does is give them a nod of his own.

"Of course it is. I offered." And with naught more than a stiff nod, he goes to climb off the little stage of the Treasure Eatery and trudge his way towards a comfy little booth. The trainer follows, albeit with a bit of hesitance–the trainer being *you*.

Larry isn't a large man, but some may reckon he has the appetite of one. The table between you and him is filled with a variety of savory dishes–fish and meat, noodles and veggies, and of course, those elusive grilled rice balls that allowed you to challenge him in the first place. He eats in some weird limbo spot between messy and polite, and it leaves you wondering what the proper etiquette might be. Larry himself interrupts your train of thought. "What gym is this for you?" he asks, swirling some green tea around in a cup.

"Second to last," you reply. "I just came back down from Glaseado, and then I'm going to make the trip up to Alfornada." There's a brief pause as you think about it. Up the mountain, stuck in that small town until the badge is finally yours...

"Psychic types have always been a little rough for me." An admission paired with a meek laugh. Larry seems to laugh, too, if you really looked at him, but you don't want to out of respect. Despite it all, he makes you just a tad nervous. It's that way he just stares, like he's looking straight through you... but when he speaks up it's like he wasn't looking at anything whatsoever. It's happening right now, in fact:

“I get it,” he says. “Tulip can feel a little intimidating, too, but she’s a nice lady. Can be real down-to-earth when she wants to be. I bet you’ll do fine.” He pauses to take a bite of rice. “You’ve made it this far, after all. Most people don’t.”

“Yeah,” you reply, for lack of anything better to say. Most people don’t—those words have almost been haunting you for your entire journey. Whether it be pressure from your friends, pressure from your parents, or pressure from your damn self, it’s weird having made it this far in the gym challenge, and it’s weird being lauded for it. You’re in a position where it doesn’t feel all too special to you—it’s just a thing that you’re doing. But to everyone else, it is. Like you’re a microcelebrity, in a position of relative fame that you never really wanted to be in. You took on the challenge because you thought it would be good fun, and it’s not really something you ever wanted or anticipated being any more than that.

Perhaps you’ve adapted that far-off expression yourself because Larry seems to notice it.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” he asks. The question catches you off-guard. You look at him blankly. He takes that response as a sign to clarify himself: “The gym challenge, I mean.”

It takes you a moment longer to answer than you would’ve liked. It’s not like you aren’t, but—it’s going differently than how you would have expected it to go. As aforementioned.

Larry doesn’t seem to mind you falling silent for a moment, and you haphazardly glance at him. He’s got a surprisingly open demeanor about him—a neutral expression that surely wouldn’t care whether or

or not your answer is yes or no, even if he is a Gym Leader, and it'd be natural for him to have some bias...

"I guess so," you finally say. "I mean, it's fun. I like Pokémon battling, and I really care about the guys I have on my team. We're like, practically best friends, honestly..." Although that's mildly embarrassing to say, your hand goes to brush the Pokéball your partner 'mon is living inside. It's been doing a wonderful job throughout the entire Challenge–a constant on your team that always pulls through, not to mention a comforting figure when you're out on the road.

As you trail off, Larry seems to do so as well. He takes a long sip of tea and goes to shovel some rice into his mouth.

"It's a lot of pressure, isn't it?"

...A Gym Leader was the last person you thought you'd hear that from. You go to look at Larry, and he's just chowing away as if his words were nothing but a passing comment, but truth be told that's the first time you've had your own thoughts voiced aloud by someone else. You shift in your seat and sigh.

"Yeah," you reply. "It really is. I kinda just wanted to... like, have fun, but now I've made it to the end and I feel like I got all these eyes on me... I dunno. It doesn't feel that crazy to me, but even my mom is gushing like crazy. Like, 'oh my God! You're so talented!' And it's like, I am? Really?" Despite yourself, you start to ramble. Larry's a good listener. "It feels like I'm just–stuck on this weird career path that I never even wanted! I just thought it'd be fun, but..."

"...I dunno," you huff, slumping back in your seat.

Larry tears into a pork bun. "I get it," he says.

"...You get it?"

"Yeah, sure. I get it."

You give him a quizzical look which he doesn't return. The man's practically expressionless, now that you think about it. You're not convinced. Perhaps he sensed it because when he's chewed and swallowed, he finally puts the food down and looks at you directly.

"I was in kind of the same boat," he says. "Didn't exactly plan to be part of the Pokemon League. Thought I was just gonna be a white-collar worker and make enough to live comfortably, do whatever I want without worrying about the money... y'know? But Geeta scouted me. Personally." (He pairs that admission with a slight scoff.) "Saw me in action battling with a friend and apparently wanted me under her wing real bad...and I wasn't gonna deny the Champion in front of people like that."

There's a pause in his story as he yawns deeply. You're very interested in what he has to say, even though he doesn't seem to be interested in saying it. "Anyways," he continues, "I started workin' as a Gym Leader. Worked my way up the ranks just like an office job. Got pretty high up there. Versatile battler n' all. But I didn't like the eyes, either."

"...So now I'm La Primera's accountant, too." Is that a twinkle in his eye? You stare at him to try and point it out again, but it's gone before you can find it. Before you know it, you're asking him a question, too, albeit a forward one:

"Are you happy?"

...And he laughs. It's almost jarring.

"Well, it could be better," he says, leaning back. "I have my good days, and my bad days...but in the end, I still have stuff outside work that I enjoy, and I still like Pokémon, even if it's turned into part of the job. There are lots of things to look forward to, even if this isn't really what I had planned as a kid..."

"Truth be told, that's how it goes in life. Things rarely ever go how you plan them," he says.

"What do you have planned?"

"Me?" You ask blankly.

"Uh-huh."

You pause. Shit...what do you have planned? You think, and think, and think, but if you had to be honest:

"I don't know."

Larry nods, almost as if he'd been expecting that answer. "Gym Challenge's not your end game, then?"

"No way," you blurt out.

"And that's fine," he says. "You're young. Even if it feels like there's a lot of pressure on you right now, you got your whole life to figure things out, get yourself into a position you're happy with. If you ask me, trainers like you should focus on yourselves more than anything. Not get caught up in being the best there is."

You sit there and mull over his words for a while. It's hard to decide how you really feel about it all, but there's something about that idea–just focusing on yourself–that does at least lift a little bit of weight off your back.

With a modest hand, you go to pick up a pork bun, too. "I didn't strike you for that type of guy," you say.

"No one really does," he responds, and this time, you're certain you can see that twinkle.

@Ram.UwU.ne

#spoiler warning

The following piece may contain spoilers for :

Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney

Click here to skip ahead.

4
x1
2?

WINNER
$$$!!
!?

dethawed in moonlight

Written By phuji

The following piece contains spoilers for Persona 5 Royal. Skip !

On an early summer evening when the sun had begun to overstay its welcome and the fireflies were waiting to mingle with the stars, Takuto Maruki sat on the floor of his study in his third-floor apartment organizing his mail.

When he first moved in, the previous tenants—a young family with two children, according to the landlord—used the room as a communal closet. The scent of their freshly laundered linens lingered long after he had replaced the hanger poles with mounted shelves and shoved a thrifted desk towards the furthest wall.

His latest nights and extended mornings were spent here, from flipping through his psychology textbooks until the covers had to be taped together to revising his papers until his eyes were as bloodshot as the red ink that his advisors made comments with. The room, however, was left to languish in the weeks following the end of his thesis work. Maruki was surprised that the light still worked when he first flicked the switch.

The stale air in his study suffocated him as he went through the piles of papers collecting dust on his desk, mindlessly tossing a never-ending stack of supermarket flyers and brochures into the shredder without so much as a second glance. The utility bills were bound together with a clip and shut away in a filing cabinet to be dealt with later, and he took the newspapers with him to his living room to browse while he ate.

Dinner as of late was always a pre-packaged convenience store meal. The familiar foods marked by discount stickers became

#spoilers #persona 5 royal

Maruki's sole nourishment as he poured through an endless listing of part-time jobs and an equally unending stream of rejections and non-committal responses.

He expected his job hunt to be an ordeal, of course. No employer in their right mind would consider a man like him—a university dropout with hardly any skills to his name, his life's work stolen by the government, and his worldview shattered by a teenage boy with the hard-won wisdom of the type of person he was supposed to be.

Just then, as if to snap him out of his depressive spiral, he heard a knock on the door. Visitors never came by. He couldn't tell if the smile forming on his face as he went to greet them was from genuine curiosity or to keep up appearances.

"Shibusawa?"

He hadn't seen him in person since their chance encounter at the buffet. Even after they reconnected online, their conversations were infrequent.

"Mind if I come in?"

Maruki hummed a confused assent as he stepped aside to let his friend come in. "Pardon the mess. I just had dinner, but there are some snacks in the cupboard, so help yourself to anything that catches your eye. Oh, and there's beer in the fridge."

"Thanks," he said as he pulled out a bag of wasabi-coated peas. "I'll pass on the alcohol for tonight, though."

The two exchanged surface-level pleasantries. Shibusawa, it turns out, was in the area visiting a family friend.

“I can’t believe you’re still living here. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a nice place, but you’ve been here since before you left the university,” he said, with a youthful smile, despite the wrinkles beginning to set in around his eyes. “Remember when we used to have our study groups here? Man, that takes me back.

Maruki chuckled as he got up to open the window. He leaned against the ledge, letting the stray breeze cool his face. “Those certainly were the days, weren’t they?”

The sun had finally set and wisps of clouds streaked the sky like lightning. The sounds of a party floated into the apartment from the other side of the street, and the smell of grilled meat wafted in soon after. School was out for the semester, and this neighborhood was no stranger to the occasional post-finals celebration.

Shibusawa joined him at the windowsill. Maruki followed his gaze–to the party, back to him, then to the silver ashtray between them.

“Still smoking, huh?”

“I could never completely quit,” Maruki said sheepishly. He rifled around the pockets of his sweatpants, procuring a newly bought pack of cigarettes, and held it out to him as an invitation. Shibusawa shook his head lightly, and he put the pack away.

“Oh, should I not have offered...?”

“You’re good, man. Just thought you gave it up once you started your counseling gig.” Shibusawa’s proud stare crushed his heart. “How’s that going, by the way?”

“About that...” He wiped his glasses on his shirt as a flimsy excuse to break their eye contact. “I don’t think I’m cut out for counseling anymore.”

There was something about admitting such a simple truth that made the world stop, made the wind choke on itself. The moon, however, continued its rise–and shone directly on Maruki’s face. There was nowhere for his shame to hide. The moisture forming on his palms almost made him drop his glasses.

Shibusawa looked at him with the mixture of embarrassment, pity, and sympathy that one would reserve for the parent of a child having a public temper tantrum.

“I...” Maruki swallowed. His throat had never been that dry before. “No, I think you deserve to hear why.”

He began his explanation slowly, letting the words drip from him like a leaky faucet, leaving out as many supernatural details as possible–no need to freak out his close friend with nonsense talk about Palaces and the Metaverse. It didn’t work.

“This is a lot to take in,” Shibusawa finally said between one of Maruki’s pauses. “But this isn’t like you–I can’t imagine you ever giving up on anything. I mean, I thought you loved counseling. Are you really just gonna quit?”

Maruki nodded imperceptibly. “I loved being a counselor. Every day at that school was so thrilling; the thought of helping students and teachers solve their problems gave me so much life. I wanted to be a hero and save the kids from all their worries. I wanted to be the friend the teachers would come to when they're feeling down.” He chuckled humorlessly. “But I overstepped my boundaries. I coerced

so many people into pretending their problems didn't exist, I let people run away from their issues instead of helping face them, I—What kind of a guidance counselor does that to their clients? At this point, quitting is the only thing I can do. You get it now, right?"

A wash of silence fell upon them both. The party was long over. The only sound was the faint electrical buzz of the streetlights until Shibusawa's phone began to vibrate. He had to leave.

"I just wish you had told me all of this sooner," Shibusawa started. "It's killing me to see you so down, though, especially when I know how brash and headstrong you can be about the things you believe in. I get the feeling there's a lot you can't tell me, but whatever else it is that's eating you up... I know you'll come back from it."

Maruki led him to the door and down the apartment to the entrance, shaking off the pins-and-needles sensations in his legs all the while. How long had he been standing still? How long had he let the world move on while he let his grief and guilt eat him up?

"It was good to see you," he said, forcing an upbeat tone into his voice and finding that he didn't need to force it at all. "Maybe next time I'll have cleaned up a little, huh?"

Shibusawa scoffed. "Next time, huh? Just keep in touch, man."

"I'll be sure to do that. Thanks for coming by."

Maruki saw him off. As he watched him take each step and saw his back disappear into the unknown, he began to believe that he could do that, too.

#spoiler warning

The following 2 pieces may contain spoilers for :

Persona 4 / Persona 4 Golden

Click here to skip ahead.

KEEP OUT KEEP OUT KEEP OUT
KEEP OUT

NEWS

the embers of a thousand willow trees

Written By osaguero

The runes burn hot under Scaramouche's fingertips, scalding the glyphs into his palm as he drags his hand along the stone. He follows the same path she had: top left, bottom right, middle, middle again, until the wall caves under his touch, a circular portion sinking deeper as he pushes. With a deafening groan, the door opens, shuddering as it goes, agonizingly slow, agonizingly loud. He scans the corridor, keen to sense any presence before they can catch him in the act. For the first time in his brief existence, he feels fear, primal in its savagery, crawling up his arms, curling around his neck, starting to squeeze.

As soon as the opening grows wide enough, he darts inside, frantically twisting the knob on the other side to wrench it closed once more. Only when the locking mechanism clicks back into place do his shoulders slump, does his breathing level out.

He feels it before he sees it. An undeniable electricity thrumming through his veins, pulling at his feet until he's running, shoes slipping over the tile. His hands press against cold glass.

A tank. Full to the brim with some fluid that could be mistaken for water, if not for its opacity, its slight discoloration, the way it sloshes against the sides sticky and slow, small droplets creeping upwards, looking frighteningly alive in the way they clump and climb before disassembling and flowing back down.

A table. On it sits an assortment of tools, some resembling surgical instruments, others far more crude, with spikes and clamps and screws tipped with an ominous crimson tinge.

#genshin impact

A notebook, turned open to a page with an intricate sketch of a glowing violet amulet, a flowerlike pattern carved into its center. He thumbs through the other pages, skimming through notes scrawled in what is undeniably Ei's hand until he stops, a familiar figure gracing the parchment.

He'd known, when the visions had started, that something was off.

The sensation of floating. Muffled voices filtering through to him as if coming from behind a thick wall. The pain. Hands roughly running over his teeth, tilting his chin up, feeling at his arms, examining, observing. The scratch of a pencil on paper. A drilling sensation, a spike of pain at the base of his neck. Burning from the inside out, half-formed vocal cords screaming silently, mouth opening, liquid pouring in. Damp cheeks. Aching eyes.

But this. Somehow this was worse. *Instructions for Activation*. He reads frantically, eyes darting across the page, barely processing anything. *Shutdown Protocol*. The truth hits him like a sledgehammer, sending him reeling back, tripping over the leg of the table to send the instruments clattering to the floor. The book falls open to a detailed, labeled diagram of *him*, dissected, disassembled, eyes empty, the breath of life not yet present.

Created to be controlled. Created to be *used*. The revelation is shattering.

What was the purpose of living, if not to find oneself? To discover, through trial and triumph, what it truly meant to be human? But he wasn't human. He wasn't even alive, in the sense that textbooks and scholars defined. What purpose did a puppet have? To be maneuvered? To be a pawn for archons and ancients?

What was the greater failure to Ei: his perceived individualism, meant to be absent from birth, or his blind trust? A marionette handing his strings to his puppeteer, rejoicing in the feeling of being needed. Control meant comfort. Control was *safe*.

And with his master gone, what did that make him? Scraps, left behind to rot? A failure, perhaps one of many. Not strong enough, not pliable enough, to be of use. It hurt. It hurt more than his creation had, though he only remembered it in bits and pieces. To be tossed aside so callously. Were all the archons this needlessly cruel?

The first time he sees the perfected product, the puppet within which her gnosis is harbored, he weeps. Weeps seeing what he could've, should've become. Knowing he could've been that important to Ei, knowing he could've been more than a child abandoned by his mother, left to survive on his own, if she'd given him a chance to prove himself. Letting him live wasn't mercy; it was cowardice. From a woman too weak to end her own creation.

He never learned. Wherever he went, he was cast aside, lied to, manipulated. Tatarasuna was a mistake he could've avoided, had his heart not been so willing to trust. He fell in amongst them like they were true comrades, pleading fruitlessly on their behalf as they started dying one by one, some evil force tearing their home apart. No aid would come, and he would take it upon himself to help, receiving nothing in return but a cold, hard dose of reality when he opened that box to find that withered heart, obtained through such savagery.

And still, he tried again. He and that boy, talking together underneath a setting sun, knowing that boy's life was much the same, destined to

end. A semblance of humanity, of family, that he clutched with shaking hands, unwilling to let go, even as the boy's illness worsened, as his face grew pale and steps shaky, body wracked with coughs that left him drained and lethargic. His own hubris drove him mad as he searched for a cure, for some way to keep him alive and with him so they could live as brothers like they'd promised. But, no matter the herbs he unearthed, the gemstones he bartered for, the wizards he consulted with, the archons and shoguns he begged, there was no solution. No way to stop the inevitable.

Alone again.

Cruelty was his mask, his sword and shield. The armor he kept tight around his heart after the rage grew, the betrayal turning him into a monster he had not been when they'd first unplugged him from that tank. Maybe if he had been this way then, he wouldn't have been abandoned. He doesn't know. But he knows it feels good to taunt, to fight, to kill. To be fully in control, despite his origins. To know that no one could hurt him because he had nothing he cared about. To know that he was eternal, while everyone else would fade away or perish, especially those who wronged him.

It was a beautiful thing, to be the Balladeer. And it was beautiful to be hated. He reveled in the Fatui's dislike of him, how they had no choice but to keep him around thanks to his impeccable track record and undeniable skill. He was the best of them, ruthless and efficient, stamping out threats and pulling the strings behind the scenes to keep everything as the Tsaritsa desired. He loved it.

The puppet becoming the puppeteer. Reclaiming the agency that had been taken from him. Serving no master but himself. No obligations, no connections. Free from every chain he had once been

shackled by. It felt right.

He had learned. He'd grown past the weakness of desiring love, of seeking family in every face and finding them all transient. Immortals weren't meant to mimic, they were meant to forge their own path. To cast aside the fetters of emotion and human tendencies to ascend high above all mortals.

He would become a god. He would get that gnosis. And he would show Ei what her betrayal would cost her.

Night Bar Blues

Written By Neuro

Tonight is like any other shitty weeknight, and yet here you are, working it. It's late–around 2 A.M., last time you checked your watch–and there's barely any traffic. Of *course* there's no traffic, it's a fucking weeknight, and the high-class bar you work at isn't meant for clubbing like the other joints around here. Polar has *standards!* Sure, your target audience of high rollers in sharp three-piece suits don't ever show up until Friday and Saturday nights, but it's better than having the place sullied by idiots who spill your hard-shaken drinks everywhere.

Alas, it's a Tuesday night, which means everyone is either working, asleep, or out at one of the trashier places nearby for a quick fix. You've got the occasional well-dressed poser trying to impress their date with their knowledge of a mixed drink that isn't a bloody mary or a rum and Coke, but whatever they order pisses you off because of how pretentious it is, so you usually ignore them. Yes, that garners annoyance, but why should you care? They'll learn to quit being a prick and order normally, you'll give them the best damn drink they've ever had, and now they're one of your regulars. Problem solved.

...Well, that's only *one* problem solved, and it's usually the smallest on your nightly roster. There are much bigger things for you to worry about, such as whether *you've* got bathroom cleaning duty tonight or if you could just dump it on that new hire Shirogane. The fact that you forgot to replenish your stash of cigarettes and now have nothing to do on your smoke break is *another* thing, and the biggest worry of all is whether or not that piece of s–

#ice scream

“Roooc! Oh Roooooooooc~~! It’s me, your bestest pal ever~~!”

–hit Idate was going to show up tonight. Which he does. Fucking awesome. As he dances in through the door, you look longingly at a near-empty bottle of scotch and wonder whether it’d be easier to knock him or yourself out with it.

Idate, stupid shithole that he is, slides right onto the barstool closest to you. You tisk and scoot away, but he follows. You try to keep going–there’s a group of people in his way, so surely he’ll be stopped, right?

Wrong! Idate simply pushes the patrons off of their seats like it’s a normal thing to do. He’s grinning his famous shark-toothed grin at you while he does it, and for a totally unrelated reason, you’re remembering that one movie about how crimes became legal for 48 hours. You ask him what the hell he wants in the most pissed-off tone you can possibly muster. It was the least he deserved.

“Aw, c’mon, Rocky-boy! Do ya re~ally need to ask your best customer what he wants?” Idate whines in a play-pout voice. You repeat your question, harder this time. Idate sighs heavily and drags himself back to his original seat, you following after him.

Strangely, he’s a little quieter when he settles in–normally, he’d be talking your ear off until you threw something at him. You try not to think about this change in attitude too much, but his drink order throws you off: straight whiskey on the rocks. Now you were thinking a little harder. Normally, he would order something stupidly outrageous, like a Blue Hawaiian or something equally as tropical and eye-blindingly horrible to look at. A whiskey on the rocks is typical of your *other* customers. What’s up with this guy?

You cautiously grab one of the bottles of whiskey from the rack, keeping an eye on Idate. He’s just sitting there, occasionally

swaying. You figure he's pregamed before coming here, but even still! You've *seen* what he's like when he's tipsy, buzzed, drunk, *and* smashed. You know that he passes out with his head laid on his left arm because, according to him, he's "gotta make sure the right arm is always ready for a cig." You know this idiot like the back of your hand, and you can safely say this isn't his normal. You pause as Idate turns like he's about to get out of his seat, but then sits frozen in place for a bit before turning back around and flopping back onto the bar top. What the hell?

Clearly, you've taken too long staring at him. He looks up at you through his bangs. "You gonna keep starin' at me, or are you gonna get me my drink?" he huffs. The attitude snaps you back to reality; even though this guy was acting weird, he was still a jackass that liked to piss you off. You tell him you're going to smash the glass on his head if he doesn't shut up, then pour him his drink and slide it to him. He mutters a thanks, taking a momentary pause before actually grabbing the glass and sipping from it.

This is how the night proceeds for a while, and you focus more on Idate than you want to admit. It's too out of place for him to act the way he's acting tonight, but you don't know what the hell you're supposed to say to him. Watching him slowly whittle away at his glass instead of slamming it and singsonging for another is a change you don't like, but how do you even address that?

You decide that the best way to deal with this is to just not. You turn away from Idate and serve the other customers at the bar, but occasionally look over your shoulder at him. Not because you care at all–the silence is welcome, actually. There's no reason why you should worry about him in any capacity. Not when he sits there doing nothing but staring at his drink, not when he starts heavily sighing every three minutes, not even when he starts muttering about "life's a hard fight for guys like us" and "cheap liquor's the

only thing I've got going for me now"–

Hold the phone. What the fuck is this idiot saying? Now you're *really* totally not actually concerned. You're blatantly staring at Idate's slumped husk, trying to make sense of everything. He *had* shown up already neck-deep in alcohol, but you'd thought it was just because he felt like being tipsy while he bugged you. Clearly it was more than that; if he'd been drinking to forget, then what was it that warranted forgetting? Did he blow everything at the slots? Did he get caught cheating on his girl with a side piece? Follow-up question, did he even have a girl to cheat on? Did someone die? Did his house get foreclosed on? What, what, *what happened*?!

Whatever it is that's got Idate in this funk, it's definitely a different side to him than you've ever seen, and it makes you realize that you don't know as much about this guy as you think you do. He's got a life that you aren't a part of, and while you're thankful for that, you also understand that it could entail a hell of a lot more tragedy than you've ever known. You're just a barkeep. You don't do anything crazy with *your* life.

But what you *are* good at is listening and giving barkeep-erly advice. Even to a customer as stupid, annoying, and shootable as this one, you know when you need to extend an olive branch. You shake your head, grumble to yourself, and excuse yourself to the patrons you had previously been serving. Idate doesn't move to acknowledge you, which doesn't bother you like it usually does. At this point, every little annoyance turns into background noise–you've got a patron and you'll be damned if you don't give him service.

You grab a few bottles from around your stores and set to work. Using some of your nicer stuff, you whip up a simple Manhattan, complete with a cherry. Without saying a word, you slide it to Idate–and it's then that he looks up to face you. He's confused, and you return with an eyeroll. You simply tell him to take it, which he does.

After taking a sip, Idate is clearly surprised. It's not often that you use your good alcohol–especially for the likes of him–and it's evident that he acknowledges the jump in quality (from GREAT to GREATER, you'd like to clarify). He looks like he's about to say something, but you stop him.

You tell him that you get it, life sucks, but that you'd never let a stupid guy like him get down in the dumps about that kind of crap. What happened to the piece of shit that makes you want to open fire on anything in your bar that moves? What happened to the guy that could take punches to the face, broken glass to the gut, and whatever other miscellaneous bar fight nonsense with the toothiest fucking grin on his face? Everyone's got their days, but for Idate, you know they're never this bad, so could he quit looking sorry for himself and drink 'till he's stupid?

(You don't mention that tonight's drinks are on you–you're not feeling *that* nice. But they are on you.)

While you're huffing and puffing about Idate's mood, the man in question just sits there. He's not even drinking the drink you made him. You notice and squint at him. You snarl an inquiry at him–has he got the hots for you? Why the staring? Surprised that you have the capacity to care about your patrons? Well, he shouldn't be. You're the best damn barkeeper around–of *course* you're going t–

You're cut off by the sound of Idate letting out one long, exaggerated "pfffffffffft." You snap your head to look at him and are greeted by the sight of him damn near holding back tears... of *laughter*. What the fuck? Why the hell is he laughing?

Before you can interrogate him, Idate bursts into an uncontrollable fit of giggles. His arms sweep to his stomach and he bends over, laughing like someone just told the world's best joke. You have the sneaking suspicion this is about your vulnerability.

Sure as FUCKING shit, Idate starts flapping his big mouth. "You—ha—you think that—hahah—that I was being *serious*?!" he pipes, now supporting his face with a hand. You wish he'd die without saying anything else. Seriously. You can feel red-hot embarrassment fighting its way up your skin, but you'd rather seat yourself in an electric chair than let him see. "Haha~! That's rich! Ohh, that's *rich*, Rocky!"

You glower at Idate, demanding he explain. He doesn't take long to divulge. "Oh, I can't believe this. You haven't been watching that new show that came out on Iceflix–*Love on Thin Ice*? The one with that broody freak Samekichi?"

Oh, God. Your embarrassment burns hotter. You *have* been watching *Love on Thin Ice*–the one with that broody freak Samekichi. It's not totally your thing, but your neighbor Yukisada wanted someone to talk about it with, and you like him well enough or whatever, so, well... it's not like you *like* the stupid show or anything. Regardless, Samekichi is a card of a main character; knowing the kind of emo shit he says in those episodes, you're dreading what Idate's going to say next.

"Holy shit, he's a riot, ain't he?" Idate giggles. "He's all, 'My life is as deep and black as the sea. Nobody knows the pain I'm in,' and it's so funny. I thought about some of his lines and tried acting like him! What kinda shit goes through his mind when he says stuff like that, anyways~?"

No fucking way did Idate just tell you he was LARPing Samekichi from *Love on Thin Ice*. In your bar. With you actually *falling for it*. Slamming an entire bottle of whiskey from your stock sounds really

good right now.

"Ahh, and the funniest part is that you thought I actually meant what I was saying. Didja *seriously* think that I'd say stuff like that?" Idate's targeting you now, and you're losing goodwill by the gallon with every second this continues. "Really, man, my life's great. It's awesome. I just come here to get smashed on weekdays 'cuz I can and there's no consequence. Sorry you've never gotten the chance to do the same~!"

You crack. You've had *enough* of this idiot; not only did he bait and switch you, but he's toying with you for showing kindness! You're tired of him! You reach under the bar and cock your entirely necessary, entirely legal-to-have-on-the-premises shotgun. By this point, Idate's the only one left in the bar, so you don't have to worry about repercussions. As you yank the muzzle up to Idate's stupid head, your bothersome guest gets the picture.

"Ooh, looks like I've used up all of your patience for the night," he chirps, hopping out of his seat. "Too bad–I didn't get to try the drink you made for me! Guess I'll just have to come back next time for it."

You tell him he's got five seconds, and then start counting down. Idate's gone before two, laughing all the way, and you take a seat so you can bury your bright red face in your hands. God damn, you need a fucking smoke.

Your time to Shine

GAME BOY
NES
EVANGELION

#spoiler warning

The following piece may contain spoilers for :

Your Turn To Die (Chapter 3)

Click here to skip ahead.

SAVINOM

Dinner is Served

Written By Rui

The following pieces contains spoilers for Witch's Heart. Skip !

"Tell-tale tit, your tongue shall be slit..."

Ashe slips the apron over his head, tying it snug behind his back. The kitchen is a space where he reigns supreme, a microcosm in which he retains agency.

"And all the dogs in the town shall have a little bit!"

He hums snatches of old schoolyard taunts, flipping through a gargantuan cookbook with charred edges—his sole memento from those days—until he reaches the page he wants. Ashe normally relies on his own know-how, yet he plans to serve an unfamiliar dish, so directives are required. He can't recall having cooked it before, actually. A couple of instructions do ring a bell, but then again, that's too vague to mean much.

Trimming off the excess has always been the most satisfying part. Getting to cleave off membranes to, no pun intended, get into the *meat* of the recipe is cathartic. Not only does one throw out what's unneeded, but responsibility easily washes down the drain. A little water goes a long way in erasing traces of triage.

Ashe is critical of his art. After all, cooking is for that Someone with a capital S—not to be confused with just anyone. No, cooking the finest meals for any other plebeian would be like casting pearls before swines, so he pledges them all to his si– to Someone.

#gore warning #witch's heart

For the time being, however, he will settle for 'someone' generically speaking. Thus, the guest of honor tonight is none other than that foolishly trusting girl, Claire.

He's not sure why, but Ashe desires to spoil her, which is odd enough given she is a stranger, and even odder given he is planning her demise. It's apparent Claire is frighteningly like Lilia at times. In every other smile, his sister's presence shines through; that same kind, naïve innocence... How cute.

And, how despicable.

When he sees that 'borrowed face', his guts churn like someone is roasting his insides.

Enough of that! Why, his little guest must be hungry and he cannot keep her waiting! For tonight, drum roll if you please...

Pig's heart!

No deeper meaning to his choice.

Now, to begin with, cut the heart down the middle. Ashe firmly squeezes the meat, perhaps subconsciously feeling for a beat.

A quick application of the 'butterfly' technique ought to expedite the task faster than you can formulate a wish. It's near sacrilegious, naming that raw act after a delicate being. Butterflies are frail little things, fluttering around for a few days before their tiny lives get snuffed out.

Two days ago, Ashe saw that ditzy girl with her nose buried deep in a butterfly encyclopaedia. Initially thinking she was killing time by reading a challenging work, he soon realized she was holding the book upside down. Ah. Looking closer, she plainly could not decipher a single word.

"Are there any interesting pictures?" he had asked, startling her. At that point, there was little incentive to uphold a charade of amicability: her guard was lowered and the Witch's Heart was ripe for the harvest. Yet... He may *claim* he's mature enough to not seek Lilia in this dolt; practice rarely mirrors theory.

"Oh, you scared me, Ashe!"

"Ah, yes, Miss Claire! Pardon me, I didn't mean to sneak up on you!"

Claire had laughed, oblivious to his worries, and nodded with a solemn face. "You must have been conducting some SCP business, well done, well done." Honestly, he would have made fun of her delusions if that wouldn't have been the pot calling the kettle black. "Anyway, these words are complicated! I asked Sirius but he told me 'Begone from my sight, imbecile,'" she had boomed dramatically, "and Noel couldn't read it! Wilardo is a bit... introverted! Ah—but I'm sure he's a nice guy!"

One day that assumption will be your downfall.

"Anyway! I'd love for you to help if you have time! You always explain things so clearly, *you'd be a really good teacher!*"

"Big brother, you're really good at teaching!"

Ah. Finally, he realizes he's been hacking away at the meat, now lathered in crude cuts. It might be just his imagination, and he did clean the slab earlier, yet his hands feel stickier coming down from his high.

Wiping them on his apron, he rolls up his sleeves and gives himself a light slap on the cheeks. "Get it together, Ashe! Lilia is waiting for dinner!"

Oh. Oh, he really just said that, huh. Trying to ignore his slip-up, he stretches his shoulders; the weight of his past errors and to-be mistakes is a heavy one to bear.

Next up! Cutting connective tissue and clearing excess fat, easily singled out due to being whiter than muscle.

Forgive the pun, but his heart truly isn't in it. For some reason, all this dirty white reminds him of is the agonising dove Claire rescued the other day, and how she nursed it back to health.

Something like that had happened before. On a breezy spring day, Lilia and he had stumbled upon a wounded sparrow. His sister had declared they should care for it, and though Ashe lacked veterinarian expertise, it was plain to the aspiring doctor that the poor creature would succumb. Would Lilia cry when it died? Would she crumble, after having gone to such lengths to foster life? He could not let such a horrid thing occur.

That's why he offered to watch over it. That's why he apologized to the small animal before 'putting it to rest'. That's why he buried it with all due reverence, this soul his sister had loved.

Yet, Lilia's sparrow had died, while Claire's dove had lived, even though she knew no aviary care. Despite Lilia being worth so much more, things only ever work out for undeserving Claire. Unfair. Unfair. Unfairunfairunfair.

For a second, Ashe imagines Claire as a mangled dove with broken wings. He could take a rock to her and end everything in one fell swoop. He could bash her over and over and over again, until his bloodthirst was quenched. Or maybe he'd trap her in a shoebox in the guise of sheltering her, waiting for oxygen to run low in that enclosed space. Setting aside the gruesomeness of his thoughts,

they're concerningly manic. A human being, becoming a bird? Do you hear yourself, Ashe Bradley?

Ashe turns the knob of the stove and watches the blue flames frenetically dance about. While it's preheating, he might as well distract his inventive mind by dealing with seasoning. Though he feels estranged from his own body, his hands moving on their own accord, Ashe painstakingly grabs the salt and pepper and inches the oil bottle closer. Solid start, but insufficient; parsley and rosemary will do nicely for a bit of extra flavor.

Once he's gathered all ingredients, he begins rubbing the spices into the meat with his hands. Regardless of how much he tells himself he enjoys this step, an unnerving sensation lingers. For a split second, he swears he can feel a pulse while kneading the slab. Lilia might have called him drearily drab, he's quite convinced he has a wild imagination right now.

The pulsing grows more and more distinct. Life under his fingertips, giving its last feeble resistance. The warmth of a body's last beats, surrendering to him.

Next thing he knows, his nails are clawing into human warmth and breaking skin. Wrapped around a weak neck, his hands work wonder and he relishes in the desperate spasms of a body fighting for survival. His gaze pans up to meet those horrendously *kind* eyes, encouraging him to continue. That wretched Claire looks at him with pity and compassion, and for that, she should die. Though she could never rival Lilia, the uncanny resemblance persists, and Ashe wants nothing but contempt from her.

He craves for cold blue eyes to dig into him like he's the worst, like he’s not even human. He failed to protect his dearest sister, can those eyes so alike hers not convey the hatred he deserves?

His hands release the Claire in his thoughts when his actual grip on the heart falters. It splatters into the pan, and he runs his fingers under a sliver of cold water again. It would be lovely if nightmares could remain contained to nighttime; he doesn’t have it in him to fend them off during the day too.

Fortunately, the stove is ready for use. Although, despite being a good cook and not shying away from appliances, he can’t say he’s enthused by that. Even after all these years, he remains queasy when it comes to wielding fire. The burning smell, the whistling noise, it brings back bad memories. Hence his preference for pastries or seafood: the odour of grilled meat frequently makes him gag.

In a heartbeat, he eliminated most meats from his daily life. Now, Ashe Bradley is exclusively surrounded by happy things. He smiles and dances like a fool for their eyes. He laughs and none notice how hollow it rings. He listens, as if uninteresting cretins have valuable thoughts to share. Childish fantasies can only endure so long: there inevitably comes a time to face the music. He must avoid becoming a Claire Elford himself.

Just a couple of days ago, she suggested they go on a camping trip to keep morale high despite being trapped. When the very sensible objection that they were stuck indoors was raised, she replied they could host it in the entrance hall. Even after being told that the absence of charms to keep monsters at bay would put them at risk, she simply relocated the trip to the dining hall. Given how limited their options were, it had amounted to mindless banter while devourings kilos of sweets — mostly Claire — and ended once

they'd spent the night together, having dragged their mattresses over more or less reluctantly. Wilardo and Sirius had however categorically shut her campfire plans down, fearing it would set the mansion ablaze. Overall, it was a rather successful enterprise; they did wake up marginally cheerier.

"It's nice to sit with friends, right?" she had chimed. "You can bring your sister next time! Because there'll definitely be a next time! A proper one, where we eat lots of s'mores...Oh, and cake with icing, and ice cream, and fruit jelly, and..." Do people usually eat that on camping trips? Claire had started drooling right about there and was before long bickering with Sirius about how unsightly she looked. Ashe is the first to wholeheartedly admit that in another life, that would've been wonderful. In the other life, there could've been such simple joys. In that other life where his sister came camping with them.

Oh my, he's overcooking. Dragging himself back to reality, Ashe hurries to turn the stove off, and places the heart on a plate.

A few minutes of rest ought to do the trick. That's ample time for him to stabilize his own heart rate; he is a seasoned liar, after all. Ashe pushes concerns back deep within, focusing on slicing and serving his secrets away as if it's his own flesh. On making it look pretty and getting everyone to say 'thanks for the meal', like they're not swallowing all that's awful in him.

He sprinkles a couple more herbs, hoping to keep himself busy. Finally, he slashes the heart in two for ease of consumption. A laugh bubbles up within, as he contemplates how he'll be doing this motion again very soon, to reveal an unrivaled treasure and get all the answers he seeks.

For the time being, it's mortifyingly boring. All there is there, at the core of life itself, is a bland reddish brown color and nothing of note. It's just meat, nothing more. *Really, what were you expecting?*

He doesn't have the willpower to tend to the ringing in his ears, nor the awareness to properly notice it, either. For now, Ashe must focus on the immediate future: he hasn't even set the table! No matter, he will simply grab cutlery on his way and hand it to her at once, even if it is not as polite.

As he prepares to dash out, he turns to survey the kitchen one final time. What a mess he has made, in more ways than one. Unable to leave things as they are, Ashe blitzes through basic cleaning. He tosses the greasy pan in the sink, making a mental note to give it a scrub later. He hastily wipes the stove and runs a wet sponge across the counter. He drags Sirius's limp body to a nearby closet and tucks it in before slamming the door — might as well delay having to deal with these troublesome matters. That dearly beloathed Sirius Gibson : once a nuisance, always a nuisance.

The kitchen already feels less claustrophobic with those simple steps taken. Picking up his tray, he merrily steers himself to re-enter the dining hall. In his hands, the perfect last supper. The stage is set for this play's grand finale, regardless of whether all subplots are concluded. As both playwright and antagonist, Ashe steadies his hands, which will pen an ending.

Enjoy the meal, Miss Claire. The last one ever cooked for you.

"Miss Claire, food's ready!"

DESTROY
EVERY
THING
@ANNOERR

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HOT PICKLE

Hot & Spicy Flavor

STATEMENT ENDS...
GOOD NIGHT.

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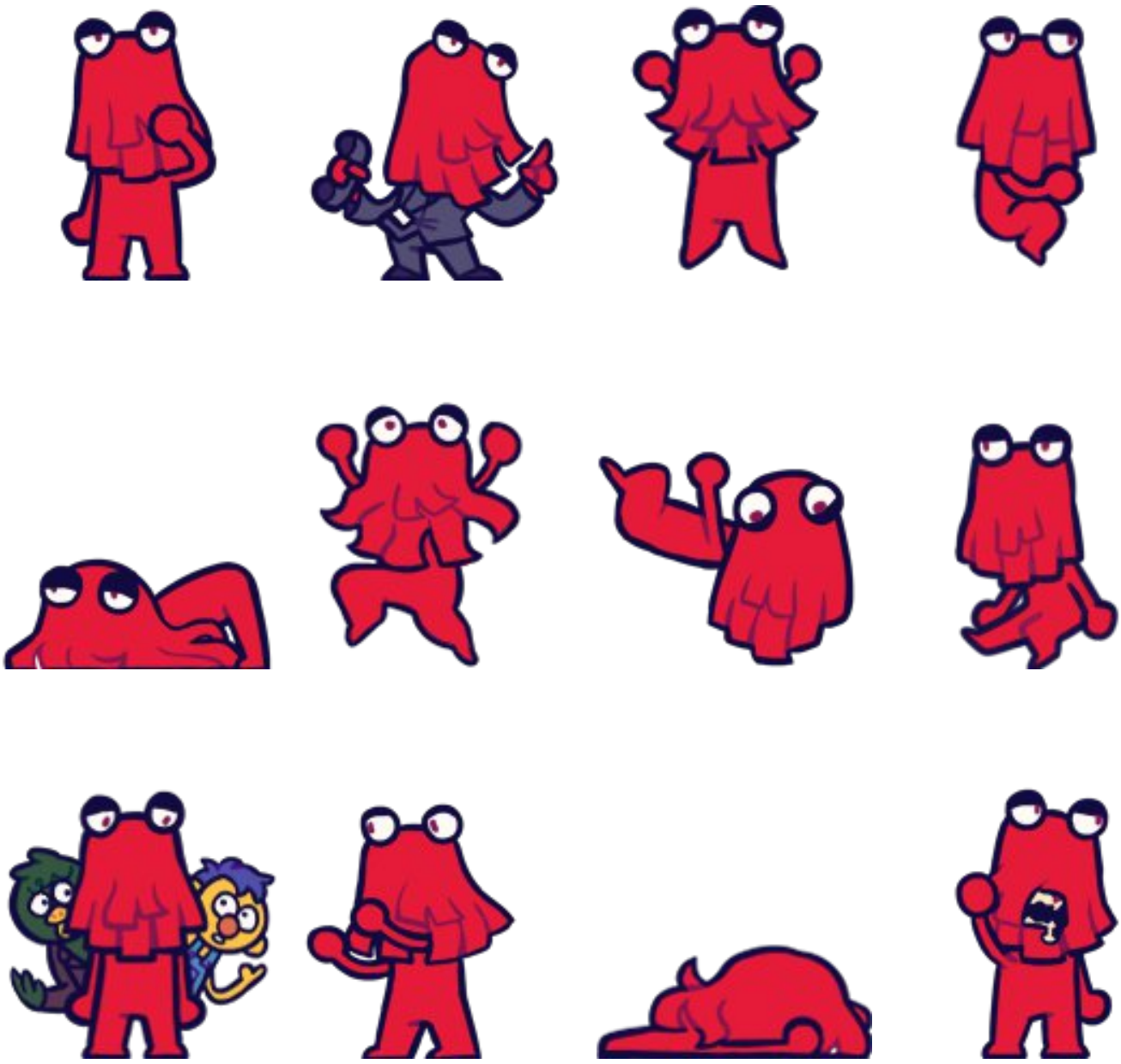

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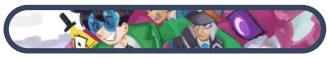
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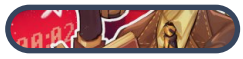
Ashe 
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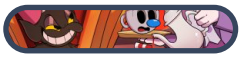
CookiePearl 
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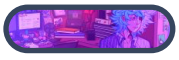
criticalamityz 
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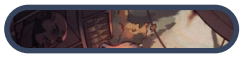
Den 
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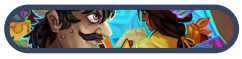
ezhangart 
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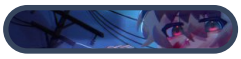
id 
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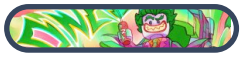
kaijuqid 
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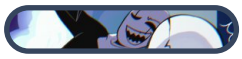
khairos 
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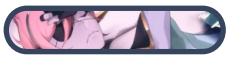
koeTari 
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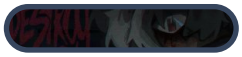
Leon 
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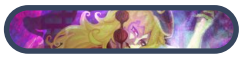
MARLOWE 
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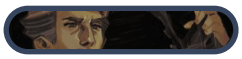
Montejeska 
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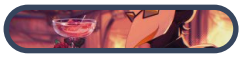
RamUwUne 
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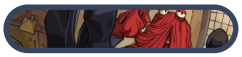
Saphizzle 
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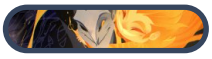
thismightydimo 
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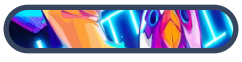
VinegarClown 
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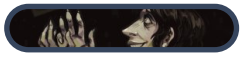
vorpos 
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